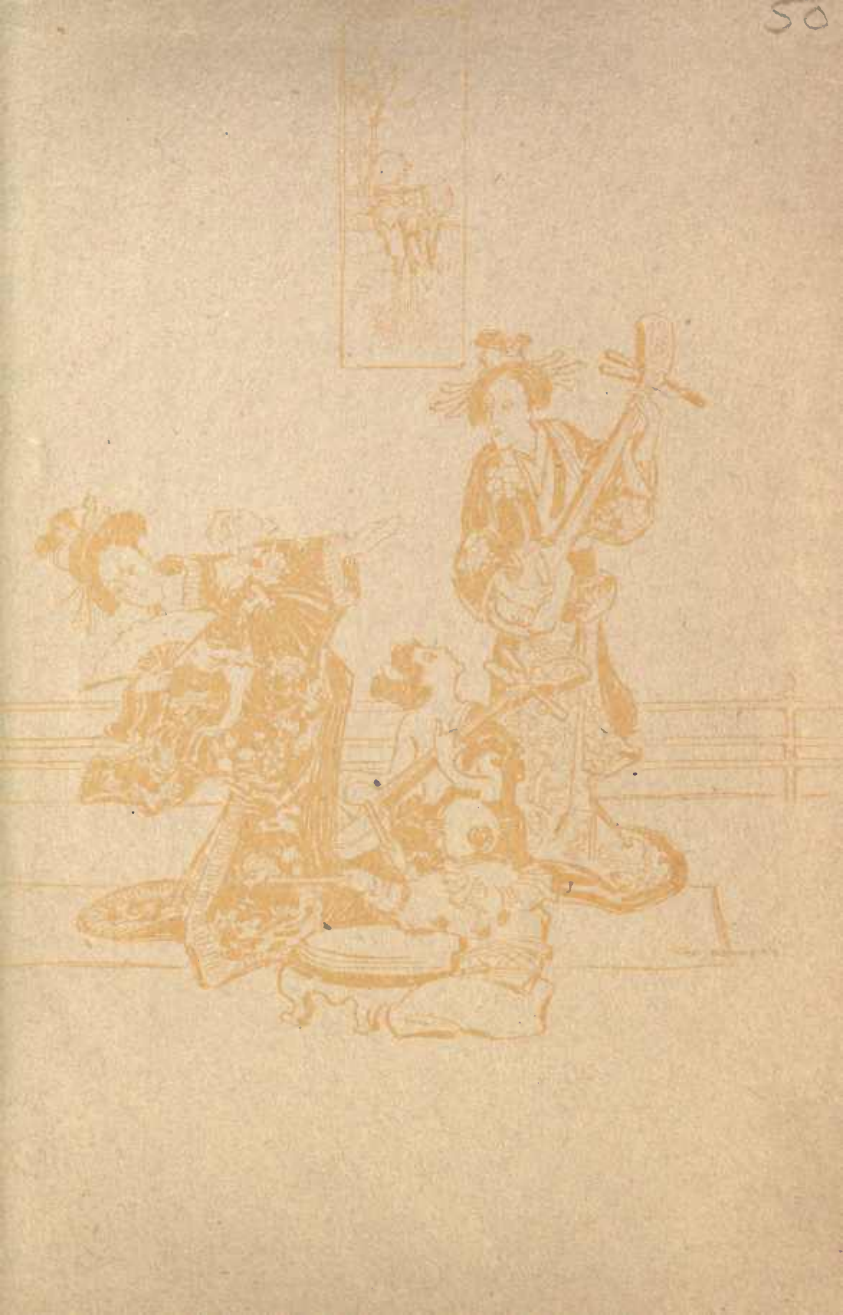

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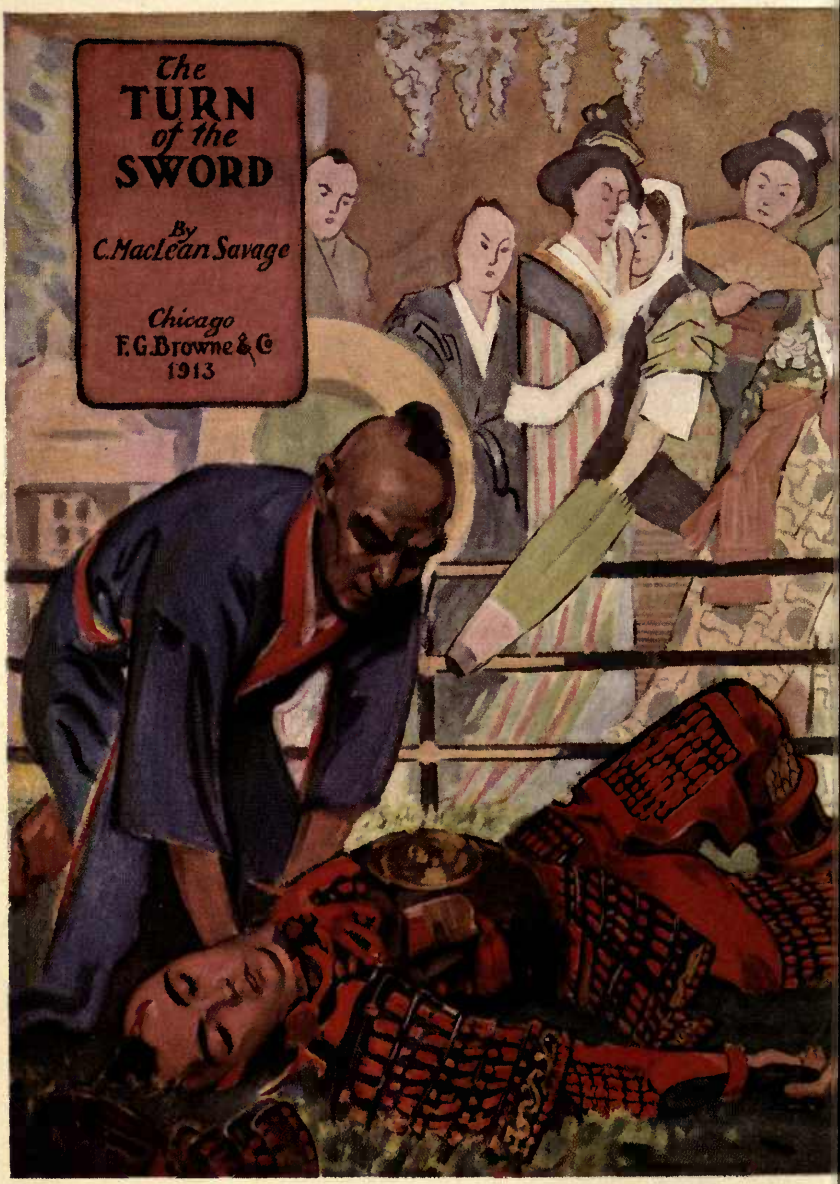
The
TURN
of the
SWORD
By
C. MacLean Savage
Chicago
F. G. Browne & Co
1913

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The Turn of The Sword

BY

C. MACLEAN SAVAGE

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLORS AND DECORATIONS BY THE KINNEYS

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F. G. BROWNE & CO.
1913

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THE·PLIMPTON·PRESS
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NORWOOD·MASS·U·S·A

To

T. N. M.

WHO MADE THIS STORY POSSIBLE

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Blow with a Sword	3
II.	A Fortress in the Forest	18
III.	A Dented Helmet of Bronze	24
IV.	The Mark of the Black Boar's Sword	39
V.	A Brazen Ring under the Matting	54
VI.	A Zigzag Path up the Mountainside	65
VII.	Broken Fingers	75
VIII.	A Halted Verse in a Poem	84
IX.	Yellow Light through the Shoji Walls	97
X.	The Wish for the Second Sword	110
XI.	The Sight of an Ugly Face	127
XII.	Black Armor Seen in the Sunset	136
XIII.	A Rolling Stone of Hate	157
XIV.	A Broken Sword in the Forest	170
XV.	A Listening Ear Behind a Screen	189
XVI.	A Kimono of White on a Maiden	198
XVII.	Two Rice Plants Torn up by the Roots	210
XVIII.	A Deserted Shoji upon the Marsh	224
XIX.	A Heap of Blackened Ashes	237
XX.	The Knights of the Purple Lotus	250
XXI.	The Shadow of a Pine-Tree	261

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXII.	The Man with the Scar	273
XXIII.	Like Black Ants and Brown	281
XXIV.	A Crawling Thing in the Grass	291
XXV.	The Rustling Reeds of Pursuit	305
XXVI.	A Blow with the Same Sword	312
XXVII.	Red River and Mountain of Pines	327
XXVIII.	An Honorable Ceremony of Marriage	341
XXIX.	A Tear upon a Painted Saucer	356
XXX.	What Said the Tapper of Laquer Trees	366

Chapter I
A Blow with a Sword

THE high and sacred sun beat down upon the fields and streams of old Japan. The banners of the house of the Red River blazed in the breeze; scantily clad servants filled the palace yard with color and noise; kites and flags and lanterns danced on their strings.

In the royal gardens they were putting the finishing touches on the pavilions, with the hurried sound of hammering and chopping, the rustle of rich textures, the ring of metals and china, and the low murmurs of the artisans.

Out in the countryside, where the temple bells tinkled in the cedar groves and the willows drooped over reeded pools, there was great bustling on the narrow brown roads, and the dust flew high from the pattering of bare feet. Through the dust the sun flashed on purple, red, and yellow silk.

All — naked coolie, silk-swathed noble, palanquin bearer, or princess — hastened toward the palace. For it was the birthday of the young prince.

It was to be a gala day. Word had been sent about that there would be wrestling contests, acrobats, and — best of all — a fencing match between the young prince himself and his fourteen-year-old cousin, the Black Boar.

The sword reigned then, for by its might the *Daimyo* — like the feudal barons of Europe — held sway over their lands and subjects. After the *Daimyo* came the *Samurai*, or knights, to each of whom — bearing two swords, so wonderfully forged, so tempered, so sleek, made by men who spent half their lives as apprentices, blessed by the priests — the sword was the acme of all that was noble; its bearer next to divine.

All in the hot sun the coolie-borne palanquins swept past the peasants standing ankle deep in the rice fields, shading their eyes and staring after the rich folk, and toward the group of long, low buildings whose red-tile roofs made a splash of color against the camphor trees.

Oh-ei! There would be great events in the palace gardens. Bright fountains would sparkle, rich food would be eaten, brave men would strut and clank among throngs of gorgeously arrayed women. The sigh of the peasant of old Japan

would be only momentary; he would bend his back, and his fingers would pull away at the stalks of the food he was never destined to eat.

There was to be a great feast at the palace of the *Daimyo*. The *Daimyo* was great — and a peasant was but a peasant. Might all the gods of the heavens and the hells bless the *Daimyo*, bless the mighty Ackagawa, bless the noble house of the Red River!

Within the great stone gates of the palace grounds two men met on a winding path strewn with white pebbles.

The younger of the two was about forty-five, tall for a Japanese, slender, and dignified. He wore a kimono of black, covered partly by the coat of ceremony, a stiff *haori* of crackling silk, embroidered with a neat design, representing a pine tree on a mountain peak. A sash of yellow was about his waist, a fan stuck into the folds.

His head was shaven, except for a queue which was rolled up into a topknot and drawn down over the well-shaped skull. He was every inch the aristocrat, the face oval, the cheek bones high, while a long black mustache, parted in the middle, drooped over the thin-lipped mouth.

The other, shorter, broader, and rounder of countenance, was a man of perhaps sixty. His bushy eyebrows were gray; tiny eyes that twinkled

merrily shone out from under them. His mouth was full-lipped and partly open, showing but a few teeth, that protruded slightly.

He wore his queue the same as the other, over his round old head, except that it was less the work of careful hair-dressing. His kimono was of gray and black striped silk, bound with a crimson sash, to show his servitude to the reigning house. He was plainly also of the nobility, for his *haori* was embroidered with a black and gray cross-barred tortoise.

"And dost thou think, O Hida," said the taller man, in condescending tone, "that the skill of a soldier of Shikoku can compare with the art of a Matsuyama?"

"I know not, high excellency," answered the shorter man deferentially. "The result of this sport alone will show. His sublime majesty has been my pupil since he was six years old. I have taught him all I know, all I learned in the wars of his father."

"Carefully, Hida, carefully! Speak softly of that. Remember the sword is buried. The prince — may his name be honored forever — is no longer my foe."

"A thousand bows of my head in pardon, high excellency. I will remember. I most humbly take my leave."

As Hida made a profound bow, the Baron Matsu-

yama snapped open his fan and turned sharply on his stool-like shoes of wood.

Behind his long sleeves Hida chuckled.

"There is acid in thy tongue yet, old turtle," he remarked to himself as he passed under tall poles of bamboo hung with brilliant paper pennants. "It pleases not his excellency of foxes to be reminded of his bitter gruel of defeat. Gods of my ancestors! Why was he not buried deep in the snows of yonder mountains in that last battle there upon their steeps?"

The old man passed out from among the grotesque shrubbery and to the gate itself, now open and guarded by dragons of hewn rock, perched high upon crooked pillars. A file of soldiers guarded as well. They saluted the sword teacher, guardian, and body-servant of the young prince.

A span of coolies bearing a palanquin paused to allow him to pass in front of them. A hiss sounded from within the litter, followed by a rustle of silk. But Hida the Faithful paid no attention to the sound.

The house of the Ackagawa — the Red River — reigned supreme in the kingdom. Its wars with the house of the Mountain of Pines were over in the defeat of the Matsuyama clan. Fine thought it was for old Hida, for he was Ackagawa to the depths of his bones.

What pleased him not at all was that the Matsuyama had wormed their way back into royal favor, for the *Daimyo* believed by giving them power he would stop further rebellion. Hida dared think that the *Daimyo* did not know the Matsuyama as well as he, who saw treacherous light in the eyes of that old fox, the Baron Matsuyama.

Long had he trained his pupil for this day, and now it was at hand. The Matsuyama and the Ackagawa would come together in a friendly exhibition of swordsmanship. Men would nod their heads, fair ladies would hiss their approval, the boys would be given a taste of the struggle for supremacy. Yes, it would all be in sport — a gala day! Yet the prophetic heart of old Hida told him there was deviltry behind it.

Hida struck off to his left through a grove of stunted cedars. Coming out from their shade, a bamboo *shoji* stood before him, surrounded by a ring of stolid soldiers and bustling, bare-legged servants. He passed unmolested by the carved pillars that held up the sloping thatch, and entered.

"Dog, and son of a dog!" cried a young voice. "Wert thou calling the boy of a million names who fell down a well that thou shouldst dawdle so? Rise, old turtle, and answer — do I look fit?"

A boy of twelve years stood with arms akimbo on clear-skinned hips, for he was naked but for a

silken loin cloth. Hida rose from his position of lying flat on the matting, face between palms, at the lad's command, and stood looking, the wrinkled face gleaming with admiration.

"Fit, my little prince!" he answered. "Fit enough for the Black Boar or any spawn of the Matsuyama. What have they done?"

"The hot bath and the oil," answered the boy prince. "I told them I would put on not a garment from *shuban* to breastplate till thou hadst seen my muscles. How are they, thinkest thou, old weasel?"

Hida, chuckling at the familiar box on the ears, felt the boy's sinewy arms and legs with the old soldier's pride in physical strength. Then he bawled authoritatively to the servants to bring in the lad's clothes.

They were brought, the *shuban* of purest raw silk, sleeveless and reaching almost to the knees; next a leather jerkin of tanned ox-hide with sleeves to the wrist, and trunks of the same stout material. These, laced on by the deft old fingers, were followed by a shirt of chain mail. Over this again came the breastplate of bronze, the jointed apron, arm plates, and shin plates.

In full armor the young Prince Rennoske of the Ackagawa stood before the admiring eyes of his teacher. Then came the four-pointed, crested

helmet, placed reverently on the boy's shaven pate and the strap fastened under the firm little chin.

"So!" exclaimed Hida. "Where are the hundred Kuroki Obuto to stand in the tournament against thee?"

"Hold!" answered the prince. "Remember my cousin is fourteen, while I am but twelve. He is taught, too, by that sly old fox, the Baron Matsuyama, his father — perhaps he may win."

"Out upon such thoughts! Where is the Matsuyama that stands in the field against an Ackagawa — or ever could?"

"Come then, old owl," piped the boy, and he led the way through the open walls of the *shoji*.

Strutting and clanking like a full-grown *Samurai*, the boy refused the litter that awaited him and strode down the pebble-strewn path under a trellis-work that hung heavy with lavender wistaria. Servants bowed to the earth, soldiers saluted as he passed. Unconcerned he walked on, prattling to the old man beside him.

And now they came upon a semicircular stone bridge, the full circle reflected in the water beneath, speckled with the broad green leaves and the white blooms of the pond lilies.

With the "*Hei! hei!*" of the six carriers a litter mounted the span and came toward them.

The boy halted. Hida saw his tiny eyebrows come together in a frown.

"I wear the red for you," came a shrill voice from within the palanquin. "I wear the red for you, O my little prince. The black of the Matsuyama is not for Madame Golden Glow today."

A head popped from behind yellow silk curtains as the litter came abreast of Hida and the prince. The face was that of a woman of forty-five, yet every art of the East had striven to make it twenty. The eyebrows were heavily blackened, the lips were scarlet, the face itself painted a chalky white, the cheeks a flaming pink. On the head that nature had covered with autumnal gray was a black silk wig, resplendent with various jeweled gewgaws.

"How does my honorable father?" asked the boy, every tone showing his dislike of the woman he was forced to be polite to. "Comes he to the match?"

"Nay," answered the painted woman. "His Supreme Highness the *Daimyo* is not so well today."

"And my honorable mother?" queried the lad anxiously.

"Your mother," the woman went on with an ill-hidden sneer, "your mother likes not the clash of swords, even as is between the Black Boar and your highness, in play. Your mother would cuddle you, which you would not like — O my prince."

"My mother is beautiful!" the boy spoke up.

The woman hissed. The laugh of the Orient suited her — it was easy to feign, and the boy's slur upon her ugliness hurt. Well she knew and dreaded the charms of the Princess Cho-Cho, second wife of the *Daimyo*. Feared her, too, for she had won a high place in the court by the birth of this boy — the son and heir.

"There is room here in the litter with me," she said, regaining her composure. "Wouldst deign to ride with Kin-no-Yaku San?"

"So?" answered the boy. "But that would be cuddling, and Madame Golden Glow has just said I would not like that."

And running his arm through Hida's, the boy strode cockily along the path that, lined with blooming rosebushes, skirted the bank of the sluggish stream.

"I wear the red for you, O my prince!" the woman called after him. "I wear the red for you!"

"And the black of the Matsuyama in thy heart, old crow," said Rennoske, as they walked briskly upward on a rise of smooth green lawn.

"So," exclaimed Hida. "Truly speaks my little warrior, for were it not for yon ancient cormorant, the house of the Mountain of Pines would now feed fat on some other prince. Truly your father, the *Daimyo*, lost in peace all that he gained in war."

"Gods of my ancestors!" snapped the prince in a rage. "Dost thou dare!"

But before the last of the angry speech had left the boy's lips Hida the Faithful had prostrated himself on the grass.

"My head!" moaned the old man. "Take off my unworthy head with its babbling tongue. It would be an honor to die by your sword!"

The prince, frowning, looked down on the groveling figure. Then a smile lighted his chubby face.

The old man was right, after all. Even though a boy of twelve, he knew that the machinations of Madame Golden Glow, then a beautiful woman, had brought the hated Matsuyama back to court, undoing the work the soldiers of the *Daimyo* had fought twelve years to accomplish.

"Thou wizened, crawling tortoise!" exclaimed the boy, reaching down and catching Hida by the rolled-up queue on the top of his head. "Arise and let us give the house of the Mountain of Pines their due, even though it be in sport — eh, old owl?"

Hida rose and chuckled gleefully for a man who has just staked his head.

They had come to a large lawn before a paved court. Through the leaves of the camphor trees could be faintly seen the red roofs of the palaces. In the center of the lawn was raised a heavy red canopy, about twelve feet from the ground, held

there by four stout poles of bamboo. Round this, in a circle, row on row, sat the nobility and gentry squatting upon the grass.

In the shade of the canopy itself, two monumentally fat and almost naked wrestlers pushed, pulled, and tugged. The grunting of the combatants and the snap of the referee's fan were the only sounds.

The many-hued kimonos of the men and the brilliant sashes of the women shone in the afternoon sunlight. Silence prevailed; the undemonstrativeness of the Oriental aristocrat seemed to make the flutterings of the white and yellow butterflies heard.

At sight of the prince the squatting silken figures bowed to earth. The wrestlers stopped.

The boy haughtily strode to an arbor of twisted bamboo hung with wistaria. There he sat on the soft, shaded ground, watching the two weighty giants tug and push each other once more.

At length the baron's favorite wrestler succeeded in pushing his adversary out of the square marked off as the battleground and the referee tapped him on the shoulder with his fan, signifying victory. The baron himself, standing tall and conspicuous under a maple, stroked his mustache and slowly nodded his well-formed head.

There was just the faintest hum of conversation while two more ponderous wrestlers were intro-

duced. They squatted upon the ground, facing each other like two snarling pug dogs.

One lifted his hand — the other did the same. The first lifted his other hand — the second kept his spread-fingered on the ground. *Snap!* went the fan of the gorgeously attired referee. Then grunt, tug, push — the match was on.

While this was in progress a boy of fourteen in clanking black armor strode to the baron and spoke to him. The dignified noble nodded and smiled, then stroked his mustache again, while the boy retired to another trellised arbor.

The second and third matches over, with a victory for the baron's men, a group of scarlet-clad acrobats jumped into the ring.

There was a rustle of stiff silk *haori*, a snapping of many fans, and another hum of conversation in the pause that followed. The referee then stepped out from the shade of the canopy and, bowing to the assembly, announced in a droning voice:

"A demonstration of the honorable art of dueling with the long sword between the Count Kuroki Obuto, pupil of his most esteemed father, His High Excellency the Baron Matsuyama, and His Most Gracious, Most Exalted and Sublime Highness, the Prince Rennoske of the Ackagawa, pupil of his teacher and guardian, the Shikoku Captain of Swordsmen, Hida the Tortoise."

The boys — the count in his black armor, the prince in his of bronze and gold — came together from either side of the lawn and stood facing each other at a distance of about thirty feet. The baron came slowly down to his son, and after bowing gravely to the prince, placed an enormous plume of black feathers on top of the Black Boar's helmet.

Hida, now resplendent in a short kimono of blue, placed a similar crimson plume on the crest of the prince's helmet. The referee now brought forth the long swords upon a cushion.

The prince, with a wave of his hand, gave first choice to his cousin, and the baron, with all the dignity of his position, tried them, one by one. He made his selection, and Hida, waving and snapping each keen weapon, did the same for the prince.

A gong buzzed brazen, and the boys came together and saluted.

Then, the handle of the long sword grasped firmly in both gauntlet-covered hands, they stamped and feinted, circling round each other, watching eyes on watching eyes.

A blade gleamed a half-circle in the sunlight and a dozen black feathers fluttered to the ground. Quick came the other sword in a half-circle; but quicker still was the parry than the sweep. The prince caught the thrust on the edge of his own

sword and shot it swiftly upward, snipping off another handful of the black feathers.

The Black Boar scowled.

Stamping and clanking, swords clashing cymbal-like together, the boys fought on. A cut — a parry — a thrust for the legs — a jump, and the return cut for the head. It was plainly evident to the bank of tense faces over the sea of gently moving fans that the skill of Hida outgeneraled the cunning of the wily baron.

On went the tourney — still the black feathers fluttered to the sunlit grass, still the crimson plume shone untouched.

Suddenly Hida cried out!

The black armor being slowly driven back by the gold and bronze — that was all the mass of brown and yellow faces saw. But the old man had seen the black foot pass behind the bronze ankle — saw the prince stagger.

Then, like a gleam of white lightning, a sword circled. There was the crash of metal on metal. The bronze and gold armor swayed, then fell to the earth with a dull clanking!

Chapter II
A Fortress in the Forest

SWIFTER than all the swift feet, Hida was the first to reach the prince's side, and in a twinkling unstrapped the dented helmet. He was the first to see the shaven head clotted with blood and the ugly gash in the scalp. He looked into the glassy eyes, saw the hanging jaw.

"I've killed him!" shrieked the Black Boar, looking over the old man's shoulders. "Ten million curses on my head. I've killed his highness the prince!"

The boy ran pell-mell into his father.

"Hold thy tongue, lad," whispered the baron. "'Twas a good blow."

Then allowing the boy to run wild, shouting the fearful tidings, his high excellency glanced at the prince's upturned face.

"The light has gone from the stars," he moaned, falling down upon the ground. "The fire has gone from the sun. He is dead — he is dead — the Prince Rennoske is dead!"

And the Baron Matsuyama dug his nails in the sod and cast the dust of the earth on his head.

"He is dead — he is dead — wo! wo! wo!" howled the men.

"He is dead — the Prince Rennoske — the son of the *Daimyo* is dead!" shrieked the women.

They ran hither and thither, moaning, wailing, falling down upon their faces in a bedlam of despair.

Only two in that crowd of panic-stricken creatures were calm. They soon stood face to face. One was the now upright figure of the Baron Matsuyama, the other Hida the Faithful, with the prince in his arms.

Matsuyama blocked the way.

"Hida, give me the blessed corpse," he snarled. "I would take it to his father."

"There is none to give, high excellency," replied Hida quickly. "The light has not gone from the stars."

"Dog — give me the body!"

"I'll give thee this, thou snake!"

With a lightning-like movement of his bowed old leg, Hida placed a well-directed kick in the pit of the baron's stomach, sending that dignified noble sprawling upon the turf. Then, gathering the limp body in his arms, he darted away through a long row of rosebushes.

Pattering through tulip beds, the old man gave

forth a peculiar bell-like cry. Again it rose throbbing from his throat. It was answered faintly, once behind, then thrice ahead of him.

He sped on through the poppy beds.

As he crunched the pebbles of the path to the gate, the bell-like cry echoed all about him. From all directions armor-clad men ran toward him, fierce-faced men they were, brandishing swords and longbows.

"To the stone fortress!" yelled Hida as they came up. "Guard me with your lives!"

The soldiers, fifteen in all, made a circle about him and ran on. As they clanked, crunched, and panted over the path, through the cedars and onto the road, they were joined by ten more.

Beyond the gate of the stone dragons five more awaited them, armed like the rest, armored and warlike. Out of the opening they turned to the right and, with increased pace, went down a long hill.

The daisies slapped against their shins. Below them stretched the black and green of a dense wood.

Once a deformed dwarf, his face as ugly as an ape's, popped out of a thicket and barred their way. Like a rabbit, he scurried from their path, lost in the underbrush.

"His Excellency Baron of the Underworld will know where we are going," panted Hida. "Let him come then."

"Is it war?" asked the nearest knight.

"Who knows?" responded the old man. "We had best be ready."

"So," answered the knight. "He will find the Fifty ever ready. See, some of the other twenty await us."

They had now come upon the edge of the forest, where the beeches appeared to have no end. The giant trees stood like pillars of a cathedral whose floor was brown with the waste and litter of a hundred years. Here and there were more armored knights, who peered anxiously from thicket and copse.

Seeing their fellows on the run, they led the way through the dense branches and underbrush, till at length they came to a low building, with walls of heavy stones and roof almost hidden by arching pines.

The size of the fortress was hardly distinguishable, so cunningly was it hidden by the interlacing boughs above, grass-grown mounds on three sides, and the ledgelike rock behind, of which it seemed a part.

As Hida reached the yawning, black entrance, five guardian soldiers about it quickly stepped aside; then, as the old man and his burden entered, they closed up the gap with a solid mass of bronze and glistening steel.

"Zuri is missing," said one. "Did he not hear the signal?"

"Perhaps the Pine Mountain Devil has seized him," hissed another.

A cry re-echoed through the woods, nearer and nearer. Crashing through the bushes came another knight, rushing and staggering.

"Wo, wo!" he wailed. "A million years of wo — the prince is dead — the prince is dead!"

"How now, Zuri," said the first speaker; "why bring you stale news? The Prince Rennoske lies here. Where wert thou when the signal of danger was given?"

"Wo, wo — a million years of wo!" continued Zuri, catching hold of a branch. "The old prince is dead!"

"How say you? Nay, it is the young prince."

"Aye, and the old prince too, the *Daimyo* himself. The Black Boar ran to where our most noble ruler lay sleeping under the canopy of his fathers in the palace and waked him with hideous cries that he had slain the Prince Rennoske. Never a word did the *Daimyo* answer, only stared. And when the women came they found him dead. Wo, wo — a million years of wo!"

The Baron Matsuyama picked himself up with a curse. A hiss beside him made him look down.

It was the deformed creature — the Ugly Dwarf.

"News, high excellency," he whispered. "The prince is dead."

"Aye," answered the baron, "and the dog Hida has taken him."

"Even so," the dwarf went on. "To the cave of the Fifty. But the prince, his father — the *Daimyo* of the Ackagawa — he lies dead as well — the news the Black Boar brought killed him. He lies dead in the palace, mourned by the women."

The baron stroked his long black mustache thoughtfully.

"Wait for news under the bridge," he whispered.

The Ugly Dwarf darted away. The Baron Matsuyama walked slowly toward a litter that came his way. He bade the six bearers halt and, thrusting aside the yellow silk curtains, poked his head within.

"You know?" asked the painted woman inside.

"I know," he answered under his mustache. "Play well the grief. We must not strike too soon."

"I know, high excellency," she answered with a hiss.

"The omen of the wrestlers," he growled. "It is a glorious day for the house of the Mountain of Pines."

"To the palace and quickly!" he cried to the six bearers, and, nodding his well-formed head, he entered the litter of Madame Golden Glow.

Chapter III

A Dented Helmet of Bronze

SQUATTING cross-legged on the matting sat Hida the Faithful. A brazen image, he moved not a muscle. His almond eyes were riveted on a heap of soft coverlets, whereunder lay a boy.

The eyes now watched the lad's face, where yesterday they had watched his chest for a sign of the rise and fall. The chest now moved up and down, the breath coming rhythmically; but the pale face was a blank — the eyes staring at the solid rock of the ceiling.

The bloodless lips moved. Hida listened. "Some day," faintly whispered the boy, "some day — some day."

"What would you have, my prince?" asked the old man.

"The cherry blossoms are pink," whined the lad. "Pink as thy cheeks, O my mother!"

"Gods of my ancestors!" exclaimed Hida to himself, still in his Buddha-like pose. "What cruel fate directed the blow to my prince's helmet? A

million curses on the head of the Black Boar. May his arm wither and rot!

"What does it matter now if the prince lives? What does his body matter now that the thousand-petaled lotus, his mind, is dead? Shall I save him to sit an imbecile on the throne? Better — a thousand times better — he should die. What is it, little warrior?"

The boy stirred uneasily. "Some day — some day —" he whined again.

A soldier entered with a bowl of pheasant broth and rice. Hida gave the dish to the prince, who ate slowly and mechanically. Then the boy lay down again, the same words, like the burden of a refrain, coming faintly through his lips.

As the shadows lengthened, Hida the Faithful watched his charge. Nothing was heard but the soughing of the pine boughs and the clank of armor as the knights of the Fifty marched stolidly up and down.

Suddenly the figure of Zuri stood in the rock-hewn doorway.

"A learned physician has come, O captain!" said the soldier. "He waits to see his young highness."

"Who does he say sent him?"

"The Princess Cho-Cho San — the prince's mother."

"Bid him enter — stay! Stand you to right of the opening here and bid Hagachi stand at the left. Should I clap my hands — thus — strike! You have heard."

In a few moments a bent figure shuffled into the dim apartment. It wore a long robe of brown, and round horn glasses. The long mustache was gray, a long gray beard straggled from the chin.

"I bring sweet herbs and soothing potions," he squeaked. "The exalted mother of the prince bade me come."

He crossed to the boy and knelt by his side.

"A cup," the doctor squeaked again. "I see by his staring eyes that his glorious and sublime highness needs sleep. I would give him a potion."

"There is a cup at thine elbow," answered Hida, watching the man closely.

"*Ei*, but it is dirty! Or let me pour some of the liquid on his tongue, and he may drink afterward. Fetch me some water."

"I'll fetch naught, high excellency."

"How speakest thou?" snarled the doctor in a deeper voice.

"I'll fetch naught," answered Hida threateningly. "Naught for thee, Baron Matsuyama."

"*Shaka!*"

In an instant the beard and glasses were gone, as were the stoop and squeaky voice.

A terrible figure, the baron towered over the still squatting Hida.

"One clap of my hands," said the old soldier, "and you go to join your fathers in the seventh hell. Look behind you, high excellency."

The baron stole a quick glance over his shoulder. His hawklike eye caught the glint of steel on either side of the stone archway.

"And what wouldst thou gain, low-born dog of Shikoku?" he muttered. "No one but your men saw the doctor enter. The body of the Baron Matsuyama is found. Who is guilty?

"Dost thou think, slow-witted turtle, I leave without my destination being known? If I return not within the hour, thou and the Fifty — aye, and thy prince — would go hellward as quickly as they sent me. How knowest thou I meant harm by the prince?"

"I know not," returned Hida. "But by the look of a certain helmet I took from his highness's head I can suspect, high excellency."

"Dost thou mean I tampered with his majesty's helmet? Thou liest, dog of Shikoku — thou liest!"

"Mayhap I do, high excellency, yet a helmet of bronze is hard to dent under the blow of a jousting long sword and wielded by the hand of a boy of fourteen."

The baron stroked his long mustache, scattering

the white powder that had disguised its blackness. He nodded his head, and his voice came, velvet steel within:

"Hida, I have in my forest a palace. Methinks a visit there might help thee."

Hida shivered involuntarily.

"Below the floor," went on the baron, "is a deep dungeon where no cries are heard. I have there a pretty toy for thee to play with. A cage it is, a little more than thy height. Through a hole in the top thy head would stick, while thy body and feet dangled within.

"If thou stretchest thy twisted legs, the tips of thy toes would now and then just touch the floor. Then, with thorns in thy eyelids to keep thee awake, thou wouldst not sleep for days or eat aught but thy words. Wouldst thou visit me soon, Hida?"

And with a snarl the baron turned and strode from the cavelike room.

The shadows lengthened and broadened till they covered all with their blackness. Striking fire from a tinder box, the old man lighted the floating wick in a glass of oil. The flickering light cast a great black shape on the rock wall, the shade of Hida the Faithful — watching, watching, watching through the long, silent night.

In the morning the young prince seemed a little

better, for he sat up in his bed and looked about him.

"Do you know old Hida?" asked the servitor in a trembling voice.

The boy smiled, but there was no spark of intelligence in the dull eyes.

Hida the Faithful muttered every curse he knew on the head of the Count Kuroki Obuto, Baron Matsuyama, and every member of the house of the Mountain of Pines.

The sun had but crawled half-way toward its zenith when Zuri stood in the archway.

"What now?" asked Hida.

"Visitors for the prince, captain," answered the *Samurai.*

"Who may they be?"

"Madame Golden Glow and Her Highness the Princess Misono San."

"The child may come, but let the woman remain in her litter. Tell the Fifty to watch her carefully. She is the charmer of the serpents."

There were shrill sounds of protest outside when Zuri left. They soon died away and were followed by the pattering of wooden-shod feet.

Through the archway came a girl of nine years, bearing a basket of fruit. A dainty figure she was in her kimono of scarlet satin and broad, pale-blue sash. Open-eyed she looked about her; then,

catching sight of the prince, her lithe little body fell prostrate upon the matting, her face between her palms.

"Rise, most glorious princess," said Hida. "What do you deign to bring to his most royal majesty?"

"Plums, Hida," she answered, holding up the basket. "See, they are fresh, with the dew of morning on their silken skins even as I plucked them. See, your supreme highness — see what your slave brings you."

She held the round red fruit up to the prince. The boy laughed.

"Pretty — pretty!" he whined, stretching his arms to her.

Hida sprang up quickly.

"Do you know the Princess Misono San?" he anxiously asked. "Do you know your betrothed, O my prince?"

"Pretty — pretty — pretty!" again cried the boy. He recognized nothing save the fruit.

Slowly the girl moved toward the prince, the plums in her hand. The boy had touched it with his finger-tips — and then Hida snatched it away. The lad set up a pitiful wail.

"See, old dog," cried the princess, with a stamp of her tiny foot, "thou hast made him weep. They say thou hast tortured him. Let him have the fruit. Quickly — I command thee!"

"So, little princess," answered the old man, with a smile, "if Zuri's Aregatho will eat, the prince may. Zuri — hither a moment."

The soldier entered.

"Is your Aregatho in the service of the prince, Zuri?"

"Aye," answered the knight. "If the little fellow can be of use to his supreme majesty."

"Fetch him, Zuri."

The old soldier sat stolidly while Zuri was gone. The princess, a cataract of words pouring from her puckered lips, threatened to have Hida's "head to kick" when his esteemed excellency, the Baron Matsuyama, heard how she had been affronted. The prince still cried softly.

Soon a shrill chattering came from outside. Zuri entered the room, carrying on his shoulder a small ape. The beast wore a yellow jacket and was held by a chain fastened to a harness on its back.

"Chatter not so," commanded the knight, looking down on the animal. "Thou art not to be made soup of yet — unless his supreme highness desires thee."

"Nay," exclaimed Hida, "it is Aregatho who must eat. See this ripe plum. The Princess of the Seashore gathered it, chilled by the dew. Give it to him, Zuri."

The animal quickly seized the fruit that Zuri

held up and, biting a hole in it, squeezed it with his thin paws, sucking out the pulp. Three it ate, the fourth it refused, and, crawling down from its perch on its master's shoulder, curled up under his feet, the bright yellow jacket in harsh contrast against the gray of the rock wall.

The prince, forgetting his sorrow, sat upright on his couch, staring at the creature and chuckling strangely.

The girl held herself erect, every instinct of high breeding expressed in her flashing eyes — to feed her gifts to a monkey!

Zuri looked down on the heavily-breathing beast, puzzled. Hida's wrinkled lids narrowed, he gnawed his lip.

"Tell His High Excellency the Baron Matsuyama," said the old soldier, handing the girl the basket, "to eat this fruit himself.

"They were gathered by his niece — the dew of morning has chilled them. Since his high excellency was so interested in seeing the fruit before he gave the basket into your hands, O princess, perhaps he would enjoy them. If he should so deign, tell him he would confer a great boon upon his humble servant, Hida the Tortoise, soldier of Shikoku."

The old man, with a sweeping bow, touched the matting on the floor with his forehead.

"Old worm — old snake!" shrieked the girl. "The beast has but over-eaten. Thou liest — he is but sleepy."

"Does the ape often do this, Zuri?" queried Hida.

"Nay," answered the knight. "He never acts so. Rise, Aregatho — I have nuts for thee."

Yet in spite of the violent tuggings at his chain, the animal didn't awaken, only drew up its legs, grasped them in its paws, and shivered.

"It is a trick — a base, lying trick!" the princess cried out. "My uncle loves the Prince Rennoske. He would save him from thee, old swine — old fiend! Thou shalt pay for this. I'll see them crush thy bones. I'll see thee boiled, thou old serpent!"

And with her tiny body shaking with rage and temper, the Princess Misono San ran crying through the archway.

Zuri gazed down at his sleeping monkey. Hida's eyes were on the matting floor.

"See, Zuri," said he at length, "thus would have the *Daimyo* — whose spirit has but just joined his blessed ancestors — thus would he have joined the house of the Mountain of Pines with the house of the Red River, his own, with this, the betrothal of His Majesty the Prince Rennoske and Her Highness the Princess Misono San. You and I were at the feast, Zuri.

"I remember my many cups of the hot *sakkee* until I was drunken. I, who had fought with the old prince against the Matsuyama, liked not this union with them. Yon daughter of the Matsuyama proves I did no wrong in striving to drown the memory of it. Aye — daughter of the house of the seventh hell, who would have murdered her betrothed!"

As if in answer to his words, the monkey screamed a frightful scream that echoed through the cave, and, stretching out its thin legs, drew them up again. Its eyes opened and its jaw dropped in the throes of death.

The prince stared wildly and began to whimper.

"Zuri," Hida said quietly, "tell the men we go at dawn to the summer palace by the Inland Sea. This place is dank and foul, the lad should have air and sunshine.

"Let ten go in the darkness of midnight and make it ready. The woods swarm with pheasants, the water is full of goodly fish. Gods of my ancestors — the air here is filthy with poison of the Matsuyama!"

Zuri gathered up the body of his ape and went out.

The prince still whimpered.

Hida, going to a heavy lacquered box, drew out his *samisen*. Then tuning up the strings of the

banjo-like instrument, he beat out a weird refrain while his cracked voice rang out in a monotonous song.

Slowly the prince's tears died away — his eyes brightened. Hida strummed and sang on. As the tempo of the song grew faster the boy smiled. Hida stopped.

"The song," he soothed him, "what is the song, little warrior?"

The boy laughed and clapped his hands.

"I know!" he answered. "'They Cut Off the Old Dragon's Head.'"

"Truly — and who first sang it to you?"

"Thou — thou!" the boy faltered.

"And I am —"

The prince opened his mouth to answer, when his hands came suddenly to his head.

"The pain — the pain!" he murmured, and he sank back on the soft coverings with staring eyes.

In the morning there was no change. The dawn had scarcely broken, a gray oval patch on the floor, when the archway was darkened by Zuri.

"All is in readiness, captain," he called.

Hida nodded. Going to the box he drew out a heavy kimono. This he wrapped about the limp-

lying boy. Then clothing himself, he stole cautiously out into the chill air.

The Fifty were there, drawn up in lines of ten. Making a square about the old man and his precious burden, they started on the march without the crash of cymbals or throbbing of drums — on through silent, dew-dripping woods, while the light changed from gray, to rose-pink, to golden.

"Gods of my ancestors!" Hida suddenly cried out, as they were approaching the edge of the forest. "The man who brings down yon beast, him will I pray for forever. Quick!" he shouted, handing the prince to Zuri. "See the waving in yonder tree. If you love your master, the prince — shoot!"

Twenty of the knights who were archers brought their longbows from their backs and, fitting their arrows to the string, took aim by Hida's trembling finger. With a whir, twenty arrows cut through the air.

Something black fell from the tree, turning over and over as it descended.

"Bring back the thing!" shouted Hida. "Bring it back, lest it escape you."

"First tell us what we seek?" asked a knight. "Man or beast?"

"A man, or a demon by his shape," answered Hida. "Will you hurry!"

The twenty ran toward the tree where their

arrows had struck. Hida saw them disappear amid the green and brown. Then, after many minutes, one by one they returned with blank faces.

"I found my shaft in the tree," said one.

"Mine was deep in the earth," said another.

"If I had but known at what I shot," said a third, "my arrow would not have gone so wide of the mark."

And so on, till every arrow had been accounted for.

"And you missed — all of you?" snapped the old man.

"Nay," said one, "there was blood on the leaves near the tree. I followed it, but found naught."

"Then let us onward," cried Hida, taking back his burden.

The road led downward. A cool sea breeze blew in the men's faces.

"So," said Hida, turning to Zuri, "I have sometimes dreams and forebodings. It seemed suddenly to come to me, that if we killed the thing in the tree, we would be ever free from danger. Since we did not, it comes to me now that the thing will kill me."

"What was the thing?" asked Zuri.

"So —" answered the old man. "Who climbs the tree like a hawk to watch us? Who crawls into a hole like a rat to listen? Who but yon

crooked shadow of his high excellency of serpents — the Ugly Dwarf!"

Zuri took a deep breath of the salt air and gazed rapt at the length of sunlit sea that stretched out before him.

"Who knows?" he answered.

Chapter IV

The Mark of the Black Boar's Sword

LOOKING down a long, sandy incline, dotted here and there with dwarf firs, the curve of a beach swung into view. There was no surf, for this was the Inland Sea, sheltered from the blasts and roar of the Pacific by the mainland of Hondo, shrouded in the far-away purple mists of the morning.

Not a sail showed on the water that shone a dazzling golden, except where the shadows of the high bluffs were reflected in the semicircle of a glassy bay.

The tile roof of a large building and the thatch of several smaller ones nestled under a great rocky rise directly below them.

"The ten have prepared for our coming," said Hida, his feet sinking deep in the sand from the weight of his limp burden, and the sweat standing out on his wrinkled forehead from the heat of the sun. "See, the smoke rises straight."

"It is a good omen," answered Zuri.

"So," replied the old soldier, with a grin. "The omen of food awaiting us. The gods could do no better by thee than to give thee two stomachs and two mouths."

"I would rather have four arms and four swords," Zuri responded. "Then would the cleaving of Matsuyama skulls be a merry business."

"Thou shalt have many to cleave with two, Zuri," Hida rejoined.

"Aye," answered the knight, with a cheerful smile. "My poor blade is dull. There is naught to polish it like the brains of the Matsuyama. *Hei!* Is there a joy like the joy of a good fight?"

"Thy bliss will soon be granted — mark old Hida."

Zuri smiled and went on down the hill, humming to himself an odd, weird melody, the battle song of his clan. Hida chuckled — this was the spirit of spirits for such a day! Accompanying the strain, the clanking of the knights made a warlike chorus. A flock of gulls whirled skyward, shrieking shrilly. The back of the larger building came into view, or rather the yard, for it was surrounded by a heavy stockade, each sharpened post composed of a tree-trunk driven into the sand and lashed to its neighbor by yards of copper wire.

A moat surrounded the stockade on three sides, the water coming from the sea itself. On the sea

side, the logs were driven into the sand directly at the water's edge.

The thatched houses formed a crescent about the left-hand corner of the stockade. These were but rude huts, partly of mud and only large enough for two or three crowded inhabitants.

When at length the forty *Samurai* were within a hundred feet of the moat, a massive drawbridge creaked down on great chains. It touched the earth just as the vanguard of soldiers separated, making a lane of clanking iron and steel for Hida and his burden to pass.

As he walked over the log bridge, two gates, spiked and studded with iron, swung inward. The old man entered. The gates were swung to after him.

"*Hei!*" he cried. "Food—a place for his highness to rest his royal head. *Isoge*, my soldiers—quickly. I am faint with hunger and weariness — *hei!*"

Five soldiers in their leather jerkins were soon bustling about, fetching rugs and furs. These they piled in the shade of the tiled roof, and Hida set down his burden with a sigh of relief, mopping his wrinkled forehead with the sleeve of his kimono.

In the center of the stockade stood the house, a primitive affair; the tiled roof was held up at each corner by three tree trunks lashed together by twisted banyan fibers. The wood was stripped of bark, and carved and gilded fantastically.

A heavy matting covered the floor, which was bare of all furniture excepting a tripod of brass near the pile of skins where the prince lay.

The smell of cooking wafted through the apartment from a charcoal fire by the stockade. Soon one of the knights brought tea in a pannikin, rice, and a fish stew in an earthen bowl. Hida devoured this greedily and sat down on the mats to silently watch his charge.

It was late afternoon when the Prince Rennoske stirred, breathed deeply, and opened his eyes. He sprang up as the unaccustomed sunlight outside reflected in his face; then, catching sight of Hida, he smiled wanly.

"Would you eat, little warrior?" asked the old man.

The boy seemed to understand, for he nodded his head. Hida watched him partake of the soup and rice. It pleased the old man greatly when the boy held out the bowl for more.

Slowly the lad let his eyes wander about him in the first red-golden tinge of the glorious sunset.

"Here sat your grandfather, little warrior, in his old age. A tiny kingdom for one who loved to roam free in his dominions, attended by his knights, wild and liberty-loving as himself.

"A great huntsman was your grandfather, boy, a chaser of the tiger, a wrestler with the brown bear,

a man whose straight, sure kick felled the onrushing boar, whose hands crushed its hairy throat while he scorned aid or the use of his sword. He was a man of brass and steel!

"His blood flows in your veins — Inari be praised for that! But here he sat for seven years thinking upon the folly of life and preparing himself for the life to come. The Matsuyama waged war then and kept him here a prisoner. He died here; but not before he heard the joyful news that the house of the Mountain of Pines was overthrown by your seven-times-blessed father. And what will you do to them, these carrion dogs — eh?"

The boy smiled — he didn't understand. The sickly smile set the ball of Hida's thought a-rolling again.

"After all, it is not so bad. But a few days ago and you lay as dead; now you sit up and look about you, eat, drink, and smile. *Hei!* the blood of the Ackagawa tells, little warrior! Did not your uncle thrust his thigh into a pail of boiling pitch to stop the flow of blood when the limb had been hewn from him with an ax?

"And what did he do, little warrior? He smiled — smiled as the black mixed bubbling with the red. Such are the Ackagawa. What is a blow on the head? Soon you will be well enough to drive the dogs of the Matsuyama from our fair land."

Hida mused on as darkness gathered. Then five leather-clad soldiers came, dragging with them a lacquered box. From this they brought forth the walls of the house, oblong pine frames covered with teak. These they slid into grooves that fitted snugly. Facing the garden, they left one space open like a door. The oil in the tripod was lighted; all was snug and cozy.

Long sat Hida by the opening.

The moon, a pale crescent, rose above the stockade. The faint strumming of the *samisen* floated on the air, accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of hands, with now and then a shrill shout. Hida knew the sounds, the men were dancing.

"So," he murmured to himself, "dance while ye may. And if ye play as lively a tune for the wearers of the black when they come, my little warrior here shall yet sit upon the throne of his fathers.

"*Hei!* Baron Matsuyama, the Ackagawa are not all dead — nor those that serve them. Mine will be the more restful sleep this night, crawling serpent of the seventh hell!"

And Hida the Faithful glowered at the unoffending moon.

The crescent moon grew full and became again a crescent. The sun cast the shadow of the stockade on the east, and then on the west side of the garden

where the stunted firs waved over the pebble-strewn shore of the tiny lake.

A month had passed in the palace by the Inland Sea where the grandfather of Rennoske had spent the declining years of his abdication.

The prince himself had gradually become stronger. Each day he walked in the garden a while longer, until he spent most of the day wandering about in aimless, open-eyed wonder. He had flashes of intelligence when he would order Hida about as of old; but usually, though apparently happy and contented, he did not even know the old man's name.

But it was not for Hida to despair. His firm faith in the all-conquering blood of the Ackagawa made him believe that the boy would soon assert himself. Then wo to the house of the Mountain of Pines!

The first sign of trouble came when two of the archers had ventured back into the woods for pheasants. They returned with knitted brows and sour mouths.

"What may be in the wind?" questioned Hida, calling them aside.

"Not so much nor so little, captain," answered a knight. "We skirted the woods above us, and were returning with a score of birds along the way we came from the cave. 'Look yonder, Hagachi,' called

Kana here. I looked and observed some thirty bare-legged swine of peasants busily engaged in clearing a space before a towering elm.

"'Let us see what they do,' I said, making for the copse, while Kana followed. I bade them cease defaming the sacred lands of the prince; whereupon they scoffed at me, nor did they bow to earth as dogs of peasants should. Gods of my ancestors, and we sacred two-sword men!"

"What happened then?" queried Hida, stoically hiding his alarm.

"Naught," went on Hagachi. "But I struck one fellow with the flat of my sword to teach him manners, whereupon they all set upon us like a pack of wolves. We slew some eight or ten before they took themselves off."

"And is it for this that ye come here with faces like a sky before a storm?" snorted Hida. "I thought me there were signs of the black. *Hei*, what are ten peasants!"

"Nay, captain," Kana spoke up. "It was not that. It was what these swine were about."

"And that?"

"It seemed as if they cleared a space for huts to be built and dug holes for fires — aye, as if an army of men were coming, captain."

If the statement of these two worried Hida he did not show it; but there followed more news

to verify the talk of a coming army a few days later.

Three of the knights had taken a boat and poled themselves up the beach for carp. They returned with plenty of the fish, and also the information that they had come upon a number of men building several large rafts. They had called to know why any one should so dare on the property of his supreme highness, whereupon the men answered with shouts of derision, and again bent to their tasks, ignoring, for the time, all questions, as though beneath their notice.

Now, shouts of derision were no more to be tolerated by the *Samurai* than refusals to give them obeisance, so the three shot arrows into the men on the beach and sent them scurrying.

This was no bad news to Hida — a few peasants less — what did that matter? It was the statement of one of the soldiers that rankled: "They were large rafts, captain, seemingly for many men."

Hida glanced up to where the prince was walking and smiled. The boy wandered on — there was no trace of fear in his pale face. That was good — so Hida crossed to where Zuri stood, leaning against the gate, the twilight gleaming on his breastplate.

"I think thou shalt have that sword-polishing soon," said the old man with a sly wink.

"I am happy, captain," Zuri rejoined, with his

usual grin. "For my blade is cloudy. It shall take many brains to brighten it again."

Hida grinned back at him. The prince looked over and smiled too, but with no sign of comprehension of their talk.

That night great fires blazed on the hills above them. Dots of black moved before them. Hida knew them to be men. During the next day there was ever and anon a spash of white, gray, or yellow against the green. They were still coming, then. At dark the fires blazed once more and a vagrant wind brought shouts of drunken song to the waiting *Samurai*, now all gathered within the stockade.

The prince was asleep within the house and Hida had come out to listen to the crazy sounds.

"Gods of my ancestors!" cried Zuri at sight of him, "why do we wait for them? Let us out and steal upon them in the dark."

There was a growl of agreement from a knot of knights whose fingers itched till only rubbing upon their sword-hilts would ease them.

"*Hei*," shouted Hida. "How many are they, think you? How are they armed? Nay, let us wait till they seek us. Do ye forget for whom ye fight that blood lust makes ye reckless? Nay, let us wait and make ready."

The knights sullenly assented, and the making

ready was soon under way. By propping logs against the stockade that faced the hill a foothold was made. Here the archers stood ready with drawn bows.

All through the night came the shouting and singing. The fires alternately blazed and died. Within the stockade was unrest and tense, nerve-tingling expectancy. Up and down marched Hida and Zuri the long night through. Dawn had just broken gray behind the trees when a louder shout went up.

"They come!" cried Hagachi, from the shelf where the archers stood.

"Wait until they get within five yards of the moat," called Hida. "Then let them have it!"

Like a wave of the sea came the peasants. Without order or formation, they plunged on down the hill, gray in the morning light, kicking up the sand as they ran — three hundred of them, howling and screeching!

"Within five yards of the moat," cried Hida above the din. "Then shoot, *Samurai!*"

He watched the archers shoot — there was a groaning and a splashing. They fitted their arrows and shot again — more screaming and more splashing.

Zuri stood the sounds of the fray for half an hour, scraping his foot on the damp logs. At length,

unable to bear it longer, he came to where Hida stood, and asked petulantly:

"Why stand we here dawdling, we thirty swordsmen, when our blades thirst? What are they but a handful of drunken riffraff that the old fox hath gathered from the tea-houses? Let us up and at them. Let us hew them to bits, captain."

A jumble of growls and cries of hate came from the knot of shining warriors there in the half-light. Outside the stockade rose a howl, followed by a shower of stones that glanced off the armor of the soldiers and made a rapid rataplan on the tiled roof.

"See," roared Zuri. "Am I to stand here and be pelted like a crow? Out upon them!"

"Hold, Zuri!" Hida cried out as a fresh yell, this time of pain, re-echoed outside. "Our duty is by our prince!"

"Forward, sons of the *Samurai!*" cried a high voice.

It was Kana, the youngest and most hot-headed of the knights. Hida rushed madly across the courtyard, but the gates were already open, the drawbridge down. With a clatter of iron and steel, fifteen of the knights stamped over the bridge to meet the shrieking mob that surged about the edge of the moat.

Zuri had said their blades thirsted — then and there they drank their full of peasant blood!

The long sword flashed red, the short stabbed crimson, while the howling was turned to a gurgling as the dead and dying were plunged headlong into the waters of the moat.

Backward, ever backward the peasants were driven. Five more of the knights, intoxicated by the slaughter, burst away from Hida's restraining voice. The old man stood watching the fight, uncertain as to whether to let the men work out their blood lust or to call them off in the sacred name of the prince.

Suddenly a sound to right of him made him turn quickly.

Silhouetted against the sky, he saw heads and shoulders bob up over the tops of the stockade on the side facing the sea. With a wild yell, he gave the alarm to the five knights that remained within the enclosure. They bounded across the stockade and fell upon the seven marauders who had tumbled inside.

Even in the fraction of a second that it took him to turn his head he saw that the peasants were still dropping over until the odds were three to one.

"*O-a-o-o-ong!*"

From the old man's throat rose the bell-like cry — a signal of danger:

"Come back, *Samurai!*" he screamed. "They

are within the walls! The dogs are within. Come back!"

The *Samurai* on the hillside turned and rushed back over the drawbridge.

There was more than the snapping and yelping of the mob as they made the retreat. There were heavy splashes in the moat. Armor sank easily among the struggling and dying peasants who helped to pull it down.

The gates were closed, the drawbridge raised again. Crash and howl, yell and clatter, rending and screaming! All was havoc within the stockade! As the peasants vaulted to the ground over the side facing the sea, they were met by the dripping points of the short swords and the keen edges of the long.

Hemmed in and unable to return, the peasants fought like demons, battering helmets of bronze, hacking through breastplates and shirts of mail, with knife, with short ax, and with club; but the blades still circled and swung, dripping crimson. On the other side, the archers still poured death into the mob below, hurling them back in a panic — dying in droves without a chance to fight back.

Inside, it was but a matter of moments before the last squirming peasant lay still. The heap of the dead lay piled against the log wall.

Zuri wiped his sword.

"The swine are all slain, captain," he said, entering the house to find Hida crouching by the heap of furs on which lay the prince. "The others have fled. His supreme highness is safe."

"Safe enough for the present, Zuri," answered the old man, "but not safe yet from blows of the past. See!"

And he took off the covering that had partly concealed the face of the boy. Prince Rennoske lay as if in a coma; his eyes stared glassily; his jaw hung.

Zuri started.

"Nay, he is not dead," went on the old man. "It is but the curse of the Matsuyama that is still upon him — the mark of the Black Boar's sword."

As he spoke Hida wondered how long his prince would bear the mark. Aloud he said to Zuri:

"How many of you are slain?"

"Eleven, captain — six here in the courtyard and five were thrown into the moat as we turned. *Hei!* It is naught to the other dead we have turned hellward. They lie outside in heaps."

"Aye," answered Hida slowly, "eleven from fifty leaves thirty-nine. We have no more to draw from, while they — So, Zuri, look at thy blade and smile. Methinks it may gleam still brighter ere long."

Chapter V

A Brazen Ring under the Matting

THE tiny lake, the stunted trees, the tiled roof on its pillars of carved and gilded tree trunks, they were all within the shelter of the wooden stockade.

Hida was there, his eyes upon the sleeping boy, who lay upon a bearskin in the shadow of the jointed eaves. Zuri was there, too, mending a jagged rent in his leather jerkin with a bone needle and copper wire. The *Samurai* were there; they sat about a wood fire on which stood a kettle. One of them rolled over a round tub, the kettle was taken off, and the hot water it had contained poured in the tub. Slowly they stripped one by one in preparation for their bath.

Count these knotty-muscled men that stolidly go about the evening ablution. There are but twelve of them. Look at Zuri. A jagged, livid cut extends from cheek to chin, the armor piled beside him is battered and dented.

There are other changes. The great gate, studded and spiked, is now half broken, the hinges bulge inward, with here and there a log sloping useless against the other.

Outside there is a change, a great and terrible change. Leading from the sand across the moat, round stones poke their backs above the water. The points of helmets, breastplates, and swords stick ominously up out of the water, telling the tale of those that lie forever silent below.

Like an old man who was once young and handsome, the fortress is but the shadow of a stronghold. One more assault — and it must fall.

Within again, only two things are the same, the placid face of wrinkled old Hida, the blank, coma-like sleep of the boy.

An hour passed, the shadows deepened. Once again the twelve soldiers donned their armor of steel and bronze, looking to every strap, tightening every buckle, carefully and calmly, not a hand trembling.

Hagachi turned to Kana with a jest. Kana laughed, and pulled the strap of Hagachi's jointed apron tighter, ran his finger down the edge of his sword, and smiled again. They stood in odd knots until Zuri had arrayed himself in his mail.

The leader walked a few paces, then squatted down upon the earth and sat there, serene and silent. One by one the twelve followed his example in posture

and demeanor, until they were all in a semicircle about Hida and the sleeping prince.

Hida waited a moment, then rose majestically, put one arm behind him, and let the other hand hang limply at his side. Then his voice came, soft yet steel-cold, without a tremor. He might have been giving a toast at a feast.

"Children of the Land of the Rising Sun, sons of the *Samurai.* We are gathered here for the ceremony of farewell. I had thought that his supreme highness would deign to give us all his blessing; but it is written by the spirits of the dead that he be still marked by his sickness for a little while. We shall all be soon in the blessed spirit land where the Matsuyama follow us not.

"It comes to me that our blessed ruler goes not with us. That, brothers, is no concern of ours. We have sworn to die fighting for him. It is not in me to ask ye to remember your oath. The *Samurai* live and die by the sword. Honorable and glorious death awaits us, for we have died for our prince. Zuri, I charge thee, when all hope is lost, give the signal of danger. I bend my knees and bow my head to the earth."

Hida suited the action to the word.

"In the name of the Prince Rennoske, *Daimyo* of the Ackagawa." He rose to his feet again. "Sons of the *Samurai*, *saianara*, I salute ye!"

Zuri rose, laid his sword before the feet of the prince, bowed his head to the ground, rose again, and took up the sword.

"In the name of the sword that is my soul," he said in an even voice, "my prince, my ruler, and my god of battle, *saianara*, I salute you."

One by one each of the knights did as Zuri had done, till the last firm "*saianara*" had died away into the stillness. Hida went to where the boy lay, took him up in his arms, and, walking like a priest to the altar, entered between the carved and gilded pillars of the house. The door slid to after him.

He was seen no more by the last of the Fifty.

The sun went down, and with its descent, red and hazy, into the smooth sea, a wind sprang up, driving swift clouds across the sky. As the night wore on the blackness deepened until it enveloped all.

Within the stockade the thirteen waited. The wind sent a spray and the scent of the sea into their nostrils, blew down in their faces the plumes of their helmets. The *Samurai* watched in silence.

Suddenly the sky was rent by a scarlet rocket. There was an answering yell from without — a terrific crash! The attack was on!

To the thirteen this was nothing. Every night for eighteen days had they heard it — the clatter of

the flying rocks, the heavy splashes in the moat as great stones were flung into it to fill it up, the whistling of the arrows through the air, for the attacking host had been increased by regular archers wheedled with the baron's gold from the service of the dead *Daimyo*.

What were these but buzzing gnats about the horns of a bull! The *Samurai's* armor protected them from arrows and stones. They were waiting for that ominous crash again. Then the bloodshed would begin.

It came, dull, sickly, rending. It was the shivering of the logs of the gate as the peasants flung the battering-ram against it. A buzzing of voices and the shouting of orders followed the crash, then it came again. This time the great trees of the gate fell tumbling inward.

In the light of another rocket, Zuri and the twelve saw a huge tree, torn up by the roots, its branches held by a hundred half-naked men, being drawn back over the spanned moat. This, then, was what had battered down the gate.

Behind it they could see a hundred more men, shaking clubs, knives, and spears, howling in horrid triumph.

The light from the rocket faded — blackness again.

And now a single voice boomed out of the dark:

"Give up the prince, men of the *Samurai!* Your gate is down, your moat spanned. Three hundred here thirst for your blood. I have but to say the word and they are upon you. Yet give up the prince and I grant you your lives, peace, and a place in the kingdom. By *Inari*, I swear it. Give up the prince!"

Zuri's voice came back:

"We yield nothing, dog of the Matsuyama! We yield nothing to thee, baron of the underworld!"

"Then die like rats!" snarled the voice. "Forward for your baron! Forward for your rightful prince, the Black Boar! Two thousand yen for the imbecile Rennoske! A thousand yen for the dog Hida — forward to the death!"

With a howl the vanguard flung themselves upon the swords of the thirteen, faces horribly leering in the red glow of a rocket. It was a quick, sweeping rush of arms, legs, and rude weapons. But alas for *sakkee*-maddened peasants spurred on by hollow promises of gold!

For a hundred of their blows that went wild, a hundred cuts of sharp steel blades, blades wielded by swordsmen, the sons of swordsmen, laid them low in bloody heaps. Still the voice spurred them on while the rockets whizzed and spat; still the experienced men behind pushed them forward, their

object to tire the *Samurai.* They gained a little; the thirteen became eleven.

The *Samurai,* heads thrown back, one foot forward, a dripping weapon in each hand, stood for a moment unmolested. They saw a green rocket cleave the air. To them it meant nothing; yet the men on the rafts, out there on the choppy sea, knew it was the signal for them to pole their craft against the sea side of the stockade.

In the darkness they climbed over the slippery posts and dropped, one by one, within the enclosure. The next rocket revealed them lined up like greyhounds in the leash, awaiting the word of their leader.

The *Samurai* had expected this; so, at the signal from Zuri, they backed quietly against the walls of the house, their blades swinging, cutting a red path through the rabble.

There was a howl of disappointment from the men within the stockade, for they had expected to fall upon the backs of the *Samurai* and bear them down.

But the evil wits of the baron were equal to the counter movement. He ordered a halt in the attack, and bade his own archers steal through the gate under cover of the darkness and shoot when the next rocket rose up. They shot in the glare, over the heads of the peasants and the *Samurai,* so as to

hit the walls of teak and pine. The arrows stuck deep in the wood and quivered there.

The ten knights never turned to look upon the arrows over their heads. Had they done so, they would have seen that these were no ordinary arrows, but covered from end to point with oil-soaked cloth and paper. Then, with a weird coughing and sputtering, fifty rockets were shot directly at the walls of the house, filling the blackness with myriad scarlet sparks.

All was enveloped in a lurid, suffocating smoke. The wind quickly carried it away to reveal that which was a thousand times more terrible. Many of the arrows caught fire, and the flames crept quickly along the dry wood.

The baron gave the signal, and before the hemmed-in defenders had a chance to tear down the blazing points the attack was on again from all sides.

With a blazing house behind them, a howling mob before them, the sons of the *Samurai* fought a vain fight; but fight on they did, for that was their life, heads still thrown back, foot forward to meet the foe and to allow a full swing to their arms.

Still upon them came the peasants. Armor gave way to blows of heavy clubs, spears thrust through coats of chain mail.

Hagachi whirled and fell, a dagger in the armpit,

a spear-thrust in his throat. He caught a peasant by the ankles, dragged him down, and strangled him with his death-grip.

Kana fell crashing upon him, his helmet battered in, his jugular vein severed, yet he thrust his short sword into the stomach of one of the baron's archers as he fell. Now only Zuri remained by the door.

"Come, dogs of the Matsuyama!" he shouted. "Come and take me! I spit on you and all your spawn!"

And cleaving the skull of a renegade soldier with his long sword, thrusting the short one into the back of another who made to flee, he gave forth the curious, bell-like cry. Hida the Faithful heard and was ready.

In the center of the floor the matting had been torn up, disclosing a square of wood with a brass ring in its center.

The prince opened his eyes, looked about him, and then closed them again as he shivered in terror. Though cowering with fear, shrieking in fright, whining like a girl, the boy was still the *Daimyo* to Hida. The *Daimyo* — gods — and even now the baron and his host of hired, drunken cutthroats were howling outside, thirsting for his blood, risking their lives for a handful of gold.

Hida sped to the ring in the floor and pulled. It scarcely budged. He tugged with all his strength. Slowly rose a heavy trap-door, about a foot in thickness, covered over at the sides and bottom by massive plates of beaten copper. A black square yawned below.

Sparks were falling from the roof inside the room. Outside, Zuri's voice was ringing clarion above the din of howls and clashing steel.

In one arm Hida took the limp body of the boy, and with the other hand seized a square of matting. Gingerly he thrust his legs down through the opening, and with one unencumbered hand on a ring inside the trap-door, prepared to descend, just as the flames, with a devouring roar, burst through a corner of the roof.

"*Saianara*, my prince!" Zuri's voice called weakly outside.

With a rending crash, a portion of the teak wall caved inward. In the opening Hida saw the hideous, firelit face of the Ugly Dwarf!

Swiftly the old man swung into the trap, bearing his whole weight on the ring. Swifter still the dwarf sprang into the room, and with a lightning-like movement of his apelike arm, he flung a heavy knife at the old soldier. It struck!

The dwarf dived for the old man. But the trap

closed with a crash on his fingers, leaving him howling and kicking in pain.

Awkwardly Hida unscrewed the ring from the inside of the trap, and, bearing the prince, crawled on hands and knees through the inky blackness of the tunnel.

Chapter VI
A Zigzag Path up the Mountainside

NOW I am indeed Hida the Tortoise," thought the old man as he crawled along the dark passage. "Even have I my shell upon my back. But that, old mole, is more precious than my body."

Hida stopped and wrapped the prince in the matting. Something warm and wet dropped on his hand. It was his own blood from the wound in his neck.

"Come, old weasel," he panted. "They may raise the trap and the rat of a dwarf can catch you. Onward — onward!"

Crawling, faltering, stumbling, old Hida crept forward. The way was hard now, for the tunnel inclined upward and he was now and then obliged to drag the boy after him as he crawled, for it was impossible to stand upright in the winding way.

The irony of the situation suddenly struck him.

The prince's grandfather was, in his day, a mighty huntsman. Often, the weeks of his lonely meditation in the home of his forced abdication galled on him. With his own hand he had dug this tunnel, so that unseen by the hated Matsuyama guards he might steal out at night and hunt the tiger with his old cronies. From their descendants, Hida learned of the existence of it. None of the Matsuyama had ever heard of it.

"Little did he think," Hida pondered, "that it would save his grandson's life. Curses on the arm that threw that knife. Gods of my ancestors, how it pains!"

The warm drops fell fast.

A pale shimmering far ahead warned the old man that part of his flight was nearly over. Farther on he found that it filtered through the leaves of a tree that spread its overhanging branches close to the ground above the round end of the tunnel.

For a moment the glow dazzled him, so complete had been the darkness through which he had toiled. He knew, too, there had been no moon; the color of the light, a faint pink, made him pause. Perhaps the tunnel ended at the very camp-fires of the Matsuyama host. This he had feared, and so had delayed his flight until he felt sure his enemies would all be at the storming of the fortress.

Cautiously he parted the leaves and peered out.

A bonfire blazed within a hundred paces; figures moved to and fro before it.

To remain where he was until morning would mean the impossibility of flight; to hide there, starvation. Then, too, the tunnel behind him was probably even now filled with cautiously crawling men, the sound of the baron's gold jingling in their ears. There was a price on his old head, he knew, and the prince's too.

That thought made him creep out into the night, dragging the boy after him. Below, down the sandy incline, the summer-house was a roaring mass of flames. He had forgotten that — the mouth of the tunnel would he hard to find now until the ruins were cleared away.

He stumbled about, unaccustomed to both standing on his feet and to the light. The burden, too, was heavy, his wound throbbed painfully.

A moving pinkness made him pause irresolute. He knew it to be a torch. In a sudden panic, he looked about for a place of concealment. It was too late. Three armed peasants came from behind a knotty pine.

"Who goes there?" one shouted.

Choking down the pain, Hida's voice squeaked out:

"I have lost my way, good sirs. Where is the road to Nagashi?"

Boldly he walked toward them. He knew not the speaker's voice.

"Who and what may you be?" growled the torch-bearer, coming close to him.

"A pedler of matting, good sirs," squeaked Hida. "I have a six-mat room to lay for one Sadakichi, the armorer. Can you direct me the way?"

The three peasants looked from one to the other.

"Knowest thou the Baron Matsuyama?" queried the torch-bearer.

"So," answered Hida, "I have heard of his high excellency. But I am from Loochoo. I have not been long in these parts. Does Nagashi lie to the east, good sirs? I must be there ere dawn."

"What hast thou in the bundle?" snapped the first speaker. "Open and let us see."

"Fool!" roared the torch-bearer. "Seest thou not that it is matting, as he said. Let us not waste time. To the east Nagashi lies, pedler," he continued, addressing Hida. "See that thou sayest naught of this." He jerked his head in the direction of the blazing summer-house.

"Matters politic and feudal concern me not, so long as I am free to ply my trade," answered Hida, turning away. "I give you a thousand thanks."

Hida stole not a single glance at the scene below him. He heard the hum of angry voices with now and then a shout. He had escaped thus far.

He staggered on, the voices behind him growing fainter with every step. He dared not think of the narrowness of his escape, dared not even think of the frightful pain that racked his brain and throbbed in his throat. He stumbled on and on.

Was not the life of his sublime majesty the prince in his hands? Who was he to stop and think of himself? He was the prince's servant, teacher, guardian, higher even by law than his mother. The thought spurred him on. The babble of voices was behind him again.

Through the night went Hida the Faithful, through mire, through brambles, and over stones. Now the pine boughs met across his path, bruising his forehead in the darkness. Again his feet slipped and paddled uncertainly through rice fields.

With courage that was indomitable, with determination that was terrible, he forded rushing streams that almost swept him away, while sharp stones cut his feet.

He still hugged his precious burden to his breast — tightly, when a wind brought the sound of voices to his ears again — gently, when nothing but the crickets' chirping and the soft ripple of water was borne to his drumming ears.

In one fit of weakness he stumbled into a stone *torii* outside a temple. Striking a mound of hard earth he fell, the force of the blow causing the

blood to rush from his mouth and throb in his temples until a swoon came gratefully to relieve the pain.

When the throbbing again awoke him it was nearly dawn. He heard the cocks crow upon the perch above him and saw their long tails wave in the morning wind.

Faintly outlined against the sky, the upward curve of the temple roof was a vague silhouette. A gong inside told him the priests were about.

He crawled to the matting roll and looked for the boy. The prince still lay in his coma. Priests, too, were to be shunned in times like these, for priests were to be bought, the same as other men, with jingling gold. There was no rest here.

He gathered up his burden and stumbled through a cedar grove, thence to a deeper forest of pine, ever onward, ever upward.

"The mountains are near now," he whispered. "If I can but cross to the other side, I shall find the palace of Kogito, a *Daimyo* friendly to us always. He shall put soldiers at my prince's back and drive the hated Matsuyama from our kingdom.

"Then shall you reign glorious with your mind cleared, little warrior — with mind cleared. Gods of my ancestors — how my throat pains! How my head swims!"

Woodcutters on their way to work gazed pity-

ingly at an aged man who stumbled through the carpet of sharp brown pine-needles with a bundle of matting on his back. A farmer, leading his ox-team down a long, hilly road with a cheerful "*hei! hei!*" turned a sad gaze upon Hida, stopped his lumbering beasts, and offered to help him. To pitying looks and offers of help the old man answered strangely:

"A pedler of matting — a six-mat room to lay for one Sadakichi, the armorer. Onward to Nagashi, old tortoise — onward to Nagashi!"

They wondered at the speech. Wondered, too, at the stain on the worn kimono and the red drops that fell into the dust.

At length Hida the Faithful reached the spur of the mountain. The green and gray of it towered above him in the half light. He saw the sun shine on the rice fields, saw the green stalks wave in the morning breeze.

Up the steep and stony brown path he toiled, his suffering becoming greater at every step. Then, about two hundred feet up the zigzag way, he swayed and fell, sending a shower of tiny stones clattering into the valley below. The prophetic heart of valiant old Hida was finishing its last tale.

He had felt something snap in his head. He knew his end was near. With superhuman strength he rose again. It was not for him to leave his prince

in the middle of a mountain path. Something must be done for him — then it would be time enough for Hida the Tortoise to die!

He looked about him.

On the left the mountainside dropped sheer into a tumbling torrent, rushing into the forest he had left. Behind was the stony path, ahead it dwindled to a brown ribbon between great boulders of granite. There was no comfort or shelter.

Hida looked to right of him.

On a small plateau stood a thatched *shoji*. The last of the outside wooden walls was just being taken down by a bare-legged figure. Hida stumbled up the path toward the house.

He found the bare-legged man squatted on the floor, a steaming bowl before him. A woman sat opposite him, and between them a little shaven-headed girl.

"Welcome, stranger," cried the man at sight of Hida. "A thousand welcomes to my house. Woman, fetch porridge for our guest, who seems tired and worn with much traveling. Sit thou in my place."

Hida reverently laid down his bundle on the grass-woven matting, and gazed weakly about the room. The blood dripping from his wound stained the floor of the hut.

"Thou art hurt, stranger," cried the man, catch-

ing sight of the telltale stain. "Thy kimono is bloody. Fetch water, woman, and quickly. Sit and we will help thee!"

Hida waved aside the man's arm. He stood glassy-eyed, swaying on unsteady feet.

"I bring thee the gift of the most high gods," he whispered. "Swear by the spirits of thine ancestors to guard it until they shall come for him."

The man trembled at the frightful face and strange manner. Then Hida knelt down slowly and unrolled the matting, revealing to the startled eyes of the man the prince. The boy opened his eyes and stared wildly.

"Swear!" came Hida's voice, like distant thunder, as he rose to his feet. "Swear a sacred oath by the spirits of thine ancestors!"

"I am but a poor farmer," faltered the man. "I cannot feed mine own mouth and the mouths of my wife and daughter. I send my rice to sell. I have none to give to the sick."

"Swear!" commanded Hida. "Thou seest me now on the brink of death. Wouldst thou have me return again and stand as I stand now to heap curses on thy head and all thy house? Wouldst thou have my dying eyes haunt thee at thy food, at thy work, and in thy sleep? Lest thy wife and daughter perish, lest thy crops fail and thy house be consumed with fire — swear!"

The man trembled under the spell of Hida's gaze. He raised a quaking hand above his head.

"I swear," he mumbled. "I swear to care for him as if he were mine own son. Art thou satisfied?"

"I thank thee and will bless thee through a thousand generations — thee and thy house." Hida's voice was weak now — he swayed against the post.

"Who is the boy?" queried the farmer in an awed whisper.

Hida threw back his old shoulders and brought his heels together. He stood up straight as an arrow. "Bow thy head to the earth," he groaned. "The boy is the true, the sublime, the most noble —"

He clapped his hands to his throat; his chest heaved convulsively. With a gurgling sound he whirled, tottered, and fell face downward across the knees of the prince.

The farmer sprang to catch the words he might whisper.

"*Saianara*, little warrior — I salute you."

Thus died Hida the Faithful, son of the *Samurai*, soldier of Shikoku, servant and guardian of the Prince Rennoske.

Chapter VII

Broken Fingers

HIS feet sinking into the sand, the Baron Matsuyama stood about sixty feet from the burning summer palace, for the heat was great and made him dizzy.

There was that burning inside him that was as hot as the roaring flames — the uncertainty of this last moment. He bit his nails as he saw the peasants and soldiers draw away from the burning building.

Had the prince and Hida perished in the fire? That was good, though he would rather have had him and the servant alive. His heart gave a bound as he saw two of his men bearing a small, limp body toward him. The gods be praised, this must be the boy!

His heart churned the blood in his veins as the men brought the body nearer. They laid it at his feet. With a yell he got to his knees to look at the face. When he saw who it was, he struck the thing a vicious blow in the mouth — it was the Ugly Dwarf, half conscious, moaning in pain.

The baron cajoled, roared, commanded, and

threatened. It was no use. To face living men was one thing; to face the spirits of the dead amid roaring fire — not a man would budge.

The baron's rage turned again to the thing at his feet. He kicked it soundly in the side. The dwarf opened his eyes, howled, then thrust the fingers of his left hand into his mouth, gurgling and coughing with the pain of them.

"Speak, ape!" clamored his high excellency. "Where are Hida and the prince? Do they live? Answer, or, by Inari, I'll have thy tongue torn out!"

The dwarf waved his left hand madly in the air, and with his right pointed to the earth.

"A hole in the earth!" he panted between howls. "A trap — they have gone through a trap in the floor — Hida I stabbed in the neck — the boy was not there — *hei! hei!* my fingers — they are broken — *hei!*"

And the dwarf squealed with pain, nor could all the kickings of the baron get him to take his maimed fingers from out his mouth again.

The baron ran up and down the sand waving his long arms over his head.

"Two thousand yen for the dog Hida!" he shouted. "Three thousand for the imbecile Rennoske! After them! Scour the woods, swim the waters — search, search, search! Who finds them will I make a prince, to share the kingdom with the Black Boar!"

The peasants, who had stood about gaping at the strange figure who raved up and down, the fire throwing weird shadows on the beach, began to take heed of his words.

"This way, brothers!" cried one, and led the way up the hill. A dozen or so followed him.

"Nay, it is here — the mouth of the tunnel is here — I know full well!" an old, cracked voice shouted, running to the water's edge. Twenty-odd followed him.

Soon the peasants were running in all directions, shouting and baying like so many bloodhounds. The baron listened to the sounds die away to the east, the west, and the south. Still he stamped up and down, gnawing his nails.

It was already sunrise when the fire died down, and the summer palace lay a heap of smoking ashes. It was noon before his high excellency called the soldiers who remained about him off from the task of raking and poking among the embers. They could find no trace of the trap-door. The ashes lay too thick — superstition held the men from searching very hard.

The sun had passed the zenith when the baron, his back bent, strode wearily up the hill.

It was a glorious day. The gulls screeched over his head, the sun danced upon the water. In the woods the birds twittered; but he heeded them not.

Despair, disappointment, baffled desire, fought within his breast. He passed through the stone dragons of the gate, the dwarf at his heels, the seventy-odd soldiers tramping wearily after in a ragged file.

Before he reached the palace itself he crossed to a building of stone that was built half-buried in the earth. He beckoned to five of the soldiers to accompany him.

Two knights stood armed before the door of the house. The fight was short — the bronze-armored men soon lay stretched out on the grass.

"Bide ye here a while," growled the baron to the five.

They saw him descend the stone steps of the *godown*. He came up again, bearing in each hand a heavy bag. Back again to where the rest of the men waited he shuffled, set one of the bags upon the sunlit grass, and opened it.

Many times did those long fingers dive into the bag and return from it, the gleam of gold shining between them. One by one the men were paid.

"Shall we guard the *godown*, high excellency?" one asked.

"There is no need," the baron snarled. "It is empty. But," he added, with a significant raise of his fine eyebrows, "we will fill it again, and for every man who brings another to my service will I double

the sum I have given now. Ye shall find me more than liberal; your women may wear fine silks, and those that have no women may go abroad and take what they see. A good master ye shall find me."

"A *banzai* to your high excellency," said the man.

They cheered with a will.

The baron smiled and went on: "Again — for the Black Boar, your *Daimyo* — Nay, not here. Spread about — walk among the gardens, shouting: 'Long live the Matsuyama! Down with the Ackagawa! Long live the Black Boar!' Aye, we shall have a merry time of it if ye will but serve me."

"And the peasants who helped?" queried the man.

"The peasants shall be served as peasants," growled his high excellency. "Thou hast swords."

He left them then, treading the pebble-strewn path in the direction of the palace.

Under the red-tiled roof of the throne-room he found the woman — Madame Golden Glow. Her painted face was drawn, the black lines below her eyes showing plainly her sleepless night.

"Well," she hissed, "are they slain?"

The baron cursed and ground his heel into the matting.

"We know not!" he cried in guttural tones. "Inari be cursed, we know not. But will I win without him — that I swear. The kingdom is mine — mine and my son's!"

He stroked his mustache and nodded his well-formed head.

Thus began the rule of the Matsuyama.

The young Black Boar's warriors — wavering, disaffected, to be bought, to be sold — harried the countryside, and, hirelings of a tyrant as they were, carried abroad with their swords and iron heels the unrest that permeated the palace.

As the years went by the peasants growled and muttered under death-dealing taxes and brutal collectors, while within the palace's tissue-paper walls the baron and Madame Golden Glow plotted and whispered, and taught the young Black Boar how hard he might drive his kingdom and what he must pay for the ride.

Upon a tiger skin under the crimson canopy, heavy with gold and silver thread, sat the Black Boar, a boy of seventeen, dark-skinned, dark-eyed, the inky eyebrows meeting in a point over the broad-nostriled nose. Squatted beside him was his father. The woman was there, too, paint and powder, silken wig, jeweled gewgaws, and all.

The room was dim, for the yellow paper walls of the house were up. From outside, above the clank of armor, came the shrill voice of command.

"Do you think, O my father," said the boy

wearily, "that the Captain Mori is a brave man, and capable?"

The baron smiled.

"Skeptical even in thy youth, O my son," he answered. "It is a good sign. Mori I trust. Has he not increased thy army from seventy to nigh upon seven hundred? Listen! He drills them now and every morn.

"Secure hast thou sat upon thy throne for two years without a sign of rebellion. Spring and fall the taxes pour in. The *godowns* are full of rice and wine. Is there aught that thou wouldst have? Speak but to me or Mori, and the blades of fourteen hundred swords will fetch it thee."

"Yet I fear the people," the boy went on, his hands twisting the silken rope of the curtain. "You know full well they loved the Ackagawa."

The baron sneered.

"And where are the Ackagawa, my son?" he asked. "Rennoske is dead or useless. Didst thou not rob him of his reason in that fight here upon the Lawn of the Roses? He is an imbecile — if he lives, which I doubt. His mother? Well dost thou know his mother is no more — *hei*, Madame Golden Glow?"

The painted woman smiled back, black-toothed and ugly.

"Who is there else? Hida was wounded by the

dwarf — his years were many. It is not in reason he could long live. "Yet the dwarf goes abroad with spies to every nook and corner of the land. If Rennoske lives, he will find him. Art thou satisfied?"

"But it is the peasants I fear," the boy insisted. "How shall we curb them?"

The baron yawned and stretched his arms over his head.

"Dost thou remember, son," — he spoke in cool tones, — "the two great dogs we brought from the distant lands of snow? No one could go near them lest they be torn in bits.

"Dost thou remember the day they broke their chains and killed a waiting-woman of the princess? The archers shot at them, but missed; for days they ran about till no one durst venture to take down their *shoji* walls. Dost thou recall what I did? I saw them go into the *godown* in search of food, and I closed the door and kept them in. For days they howled and whined.

"A week passed, and I had them let out again. What were they, these ferocious beasts that had threatened all our lives? Lean till the ribs showed, the white teeth snapped harmless at the air, their tongues lolled.

"They tried to run at me, but — gods! I can see them now — they fell down! Hunger, thirst,

and darkness had done what the arrows of the archers could not do. I killed each one with a kick. A child could have done as well.

"Dost thou see, boy? If the peasants rise, we will take their food. Open the door, woman; let us look upon our men-at-arms."

Chapter VIII

A Halted Verse in a Poem

STANDING in water that reached to the middle of his well-rounded calves was a Japanese boy of eighteen.

His face was a perfect oval, the eyes clear and wide-open; a tinge of pink flushed his high cheek bones; the mouth was small and well-formed, with a rich fulness to the lower lip. His fingers, wrinkled by long immersion, swiftly pulled forth green stalk after green stalk, laying the rice plants on the mud dike behind him in a neat row.

He was dressed in a *haragakke*, a short pinafore of gray. Under it showed a *shuban* of cotton of the same color, while over his loin cloth was drawn a pair of heavy cotton trunks — white they had been, but were now stained in brown splotches by the earth.

His legs were bare, and on his head a straw *tycoon*, like an inverted soup bowl. Even as back bent low and the head bobbed up and down in the sunlight, his voice came in a steady, songlike monotone, forming a sort of recitation.

"Diligent even at thy task, Little Warrior?"

The boy looked up quickly at the words, then bowed profoundly. Standing on the mud dike above him was a thin, wrinkled old man in a faded kimono. He was the Shinto priest, teacher, and philosopher of the countryside, honored and respected by all.

"I know it here in the rice fields, O holy sir," the boy answered cheerfully.

"Then thou shouldst know it tomorrow," said the priest. "A prayer and an offering at the house shrine and all will be well. Thou dost not yet recall the name of the man who brought thee hither?" he added gravely. "It is not well to pray to a spirit unknown."

"Then my prayers must be useless," the boy replied. "I know the man was good to me and I owe him my life, for it seems to me he brought me here through great danger, but who he was I cannot recall."

"And thyself?" quizzed the priest.

"Of myself I know still less," the boy answered. "I have a confused remembrance of swords, armor, and much shouting, then flames burst forth and all is blackness. I cannot tell thee more, O holy sir, for it pains me here."

The boy pointed to a jagged scar above his forehead.

"Fear not," said the priest kindly. "Thou art now the adopted son of Miyoshi the farmer, a sturdy lad and clever. Pray to the spirit of thy dead benefactor, who must haunt his grave these six years. May thy sinews grow with thy knowledge — until the morrow then, farewell."

The boy bowed low again as the old priest stalked majestically along the dike, turned the corner of a boulder, and was lost to sight among the pine boughs.

All afternoon the boy toiled among the rice plants in the water that trickled through irrigation ditches, one above the other, on the mountainside through the devious dikes of mud. All day long he culled the rice, his lips busy the while, mumbling the long, singsong recitation.

At last he knew that the sun was sinking, so he rose and watched it, a scarlet ball, dip behind the fir-clad hills. The country was mountainous on all sides, the green slopes dotted with tiny houses of bamboo and thatch.

The place where he stood was about four hundred feet up the slope, which it rolled down rather steeply to a narrow brown road that curved up and down like a toboggan track. On the other side it rose again for perhaps a hundred feet, then fell again, a higher rise behind it, and so on, innumerable hills and dells, up and down, up and

down, green with pine, spruce, cedar, and maple, with the brown of cottage roofs the only contrast against the vernal hue.

Above the boy, as he turned, the mountain towered sheer, the top of it lost in a scarlet haze.

The boy heaved the sigh of one finished with his task and glad of it. He climbed out of the ditch and ran along the top of the highest dike, while the sun turned the many ditches below him into flashing ribbons of orange.

Once more a familiar scene came before him. It was the tiny plateau, in the middle of which stood the thatched roof of the cottage on its four beams and platform of wood.

He saw the figure of Miyoshi the Farmer standing by a stone well, half enveloped in a cloud of blue smoke. Under the roof the kimonos of two women bustled about as they prepared the evening meal.

There were two cherry trees before the house, two more round wells of stone, and an oblong patch of ground behind the cottage where the chrysanthemums bloomed in November. This he had seen often, so often that it had become woven into his life, and he accepted it gladly as his life.

"How looks the crop for transplanting, son?" asked Miyoshi, as the boy came up to him, his eyes still on the charcoal brazier before him.

"'Tis a goodly one, my father," answered the boy. "For you the winter should be a time of ease and plenty."

"So," said the farmer with a grunt. "If I can sell it all it may be. Yet methinks the soldiers of the Matsuyama will be upon me to seize their half after we have gone to the trouble to hull and bag it. Blessed be the day when the Prince Rennoske comes into his own — if he ever does."

"And who is the Prince Rennoske, O my father?" asked the boy.

So the farmer told the Prince Rennoske who he was, but the Prince Rennoske learned nothing from the telling — learned not that he, the adopted son of Miyoshi the Farmer, was himself the prince, the hereditary *Daimyo* of the very ground he stood upon.

And so in the twilight Prince Rennoske burned charcoal, while the light in the west changed from orange to blue over his dominion, and the blue of the smoke from his fire rose straight up to mingle with it.

"Father bids me tell you supper awaits you."

Rennoske looked up blinking from the red coals to find a girl of fourteen, with eyes downcast, standing before him.

"Then it is welcome, O Kiku San," he answered. "Welcome as thy presence here in the soft shades of

evening." Then, leaning toward her, he added softly: "And that is as welcome as the nightingale's song in the springtime."

The girl blushed at the familiarity, then with a rippling laugh turned and ran back to the house, while the boy followed.

They squatted on the floor, each before a little traylike table, the farmer, his wife, the boy, and the girl.

Rennoske would raise his eyes from his bowl of millet and they would meet the eyes of Kiku. And then Kiku's eyes would fall — not under Rennoske's gaze, for she could have gazed upon him while her food grew cold and never complain. It was the eyes of her father she felt ashamed under — girls are not supposed to look so longingly at adopted brothers. Yet Kiku looked when she dared.

Rennoske's eyes were somehow always there to meet hers. Kiku's eyes he had not seen in his childhood, he felt certain. He would not have forgotten them if he had.

After the meal came the nightly game of *shogi*. This daily bore had become a dread to Rennoske. Better to sit by Kiku, who embroidered by the alcove, where stood the green vase with the spray of flowers. Better to stroll with her by the mountain torrent and to watch the spray from it shine in the moonlight.

But talks and strolls with Kiku were forbidden things since they had both grown up — that is, while Miyoshi was in sight, — so the young man swallowed a yawn and consented to let the farmer checkmate him.

By this time Miyoshi's wife had brought out the walls of paper with wooden frame and slid them into the grooves so that the one room became four, with one for each. Rennoske put up the outside walls, and taking up his quilting went into the little paper-enclosed square that was his own resting place. He laid the bedding on whatever part of the heavy grass matting best suited him, though there was not much room for choice, and laying his head upon his pillow of wood, he slept — to dream of Kiku's eyes.

In the early morning he rose and took the round little bathtub of wood into the garden. Then with water heated to the boiling point in a kettle placed upon a rude brick stove outside, he took his hot bath. Returning to the house, he donned his clean loin cloth and *shuban*, and putting on his best kimono of dark green, with the tan sash, he was ready.

This was the day of the poetic contest, and so the farmer had excused him from work.

After a light meal he started off with the well-wishes of his foster-father, his literary composition in the wide sleeve of his garment. There was no

reason why he should do so, but he took the path that led by the rice fields.

There the reason became evident. Her kimono tucked above her dainty ankles, awash in the green-reflected water, stood Kiku.

"Wish me a lanternful of luck, O Kiku," cried Rennoske. "I go to the contest."

"A lanternful is too small, Little Warrior," she answered demurely. "Rather let my good wishes fill a temple. May the chrysanthemum of thy poem never fade."

"May she never," he answered smiling. "For if the water below thee were still, there might you see her, bright and yellow as the sun, O Kiku."

The girl hung her head, blushing again at the tender play upon her name. Then, stooping quickly, her hands were busy among the rice plants.

"Would that I might come with you to the temple," she whispered without looking up.

"Would that you could, and farther," he answered softly.

She did not look up, though her whirling brain was far from the green stalks where her fingers were busy.

"I go," he went on. "Know that thou art the flower of my poem, O Kiku!"

But again Kiku did not reply, whereupon Rennoske went his way, wondering upon the strange ways of women.

Kiku tried then to tell him, but it was more than her trembling lips could utter. Still the tiny fingers worked on among the green stalks.

A tear stole down her cheek and splashed in the shallow water. She felt, as it was so quickly lost, that this would be her life, her grief, but the tiniest drop in the water of circumstance. She was but a girl after all — and girls had no right to opinions or choice, in matters of love.

Rennoske kept to the mountain path that skirted the edge of the pine belt above him.

Below the road ran parallel, and between it and where he walked the slope was dotted with rice fields and cottages, all alike, all with gardens at the back, that faced the south. Oxen labored in the mire; *tycoon*-covered heads of men, the bare heads of women, their glossy hair shining in the sun, bobbed up and down. A song floated to him, now and then mingling with the splash of the water.

By noon he came to the square in the center of the village of Takenaka, where the people made merry on holidays. He saw by the lack of shadow on the green lawn that it must be high noon, and struck off to his left through the maples, and by a short cut through the woods reached the temple grounds.

The temple itself was a small building, boasting

a tiled roof with upturning eaves, elaborately painted and carved. The sides were boarded with a brilliantly varnished pine, while paper-covered windows were cut in the front, one to right and another to the left of two swinging doors of bamboo. From under these came the steady buzz of voices.

When Rennoske entered the other scholars were already there, eleven in all, with quite a sprinkling of fathers, brothers, grandfathers, and uncles, all squatted upon the board floor. The old priest was standing upon the single step below the shrine, which stood on a raised platform.

The shrine itself was but a rude wooden figure of the Fox Goddess Inari, flanked by two fantastic pictures on silk. From the heavy log rafters hung the great round brass gong with the padded stick attached for the invocation of the goddess.

The priest saw the boy enter and nodded to him, whereupon Rennoske bowed, and sat down in the rear. The old philosopher began a long discourse upon the muse of poetry, and the important place it held in the lives of all true subjects of the Mikado and true children of the Land of the Rising Sun. Graven faces looked on without a sign, while eager ears drank in every word.

And now the contest was begun by Tsunejuro, tenth son of the Cormorant Fisher, who droned forth "The Shining of Torches on the Still Water."

Gentaro, the Wagoner's son, delivered his effort — "The Wild Geese Flying Cross-Winged Over the Meadow." One by one the boys recited their five-syllable, seven-syllable verses in turn.

At length the old priest called out: "Little Warrior, son of Miyoshi the Farmer, who will deliver 'A Lone Chrysanthemum in a Garden on the Mountainside.'"

Rennoske walked majestically to the space before the shrine, beat the gong thrice, and turned to face his audience. Every one commented upon his lofty bearing. The other boys felt the prize farther from them. The old priest smiled. The boy began.

Almond eyes sparkled, dull brains marveled. The words were an inspiration! Had another poet like the great Tsuriyuki come among them?

"The daily task is easy when the golden flower at dawn —"

The boy stopped dead, and a titter ran about the room.

"It is not finished, my son," whispered the old priest anxiously. "There is more. Is it not about the joy it gives thee?"

But never a word answered Rennoske. The boy's eyes stared straight before him, the while a childish smile was upon his lips. There was no pain there, yet the face was a blank like a baby's.

"The sickness is upon him," said the old man, as

he solemnly held up his hand. "We are to pity and help him, for his mind is gifted. Tsunejuro and Gentaro, fetch thou the boy home, and my prayers shall be with ye both. Thou knowest where he bides."

They brought Rennoske home between them, an arm over each of their shoulders. Miyoshi they found by his charcoal fire and told him what had happened.

"Is it not odd? Is it not strange?" piped the farmer at sight of the lad. "Thrice have I seen him thus; like a stupid babe he stares and knows us not.

"Come, lad," and he took Rennoske by the hand, "lie thou in the house till this shall pass." Then to the boys: "I thank thee both for thy services. He will soon be well again."

The boys departed, giving each other sly nudges and strange glances. The farmer led his foster-son to his bed, bade him lie down, and placed about him a folding screen of paper.

Then the old man sat upon his door-step and thus mumbled to himself:

"The gods do strange things to those upon the earth. A man comes to me with a roll of matting. The matting he unrolls and discloses this lad, lying there frighted half to death.

"The man makes me swear to guard this lad till

he be sent for. I fain would refuse — the man like a tiger threatens me with haunting after death — I do as he bids me, for I want no spirits to curse my food before it goes adown my gullet — *hei!* A great lad, a hulking lad — strong, quick — a help to me he has been.

"The man who brought him must needs keep out of my dreams, for I need the lad. But this — this — this!" Miyoshi's voice rose to a high falsetto. "To stare like a babe, to know naught, *hei* — it is strange! A perfect pot with a cracked lid, a fat ox with a blind eye — pish! The gods have made a mistake to put so sour a wine in so fine a cup. Yet must I to the rice fields. Kiku cannot do all alone."

And Miyoshi the Farmer strode along the path, turning the strangeness of it over and over in his mind; yet no conclusion could he come to.

Kiku San saw him coming, and quickly dried her eyes.

Chapter IX

Yellow Light through the Shoji Walls

A JAPANESE boy, oval of face, knotty of limb, full-lipped and almond-eyed, took down the last paper shutter of the cottage on the tiny plateau. The air was chill, for the sun had not yet shown its red rim over the distant fir-clad hills.

He hummed to himself as he laid the frame in its wooden box, for there was a tinge of autumn in the air that set his blood tingling. He went to the brick stove, set the kettle on the fire, and squatted upon the ground to watch the water boil.

When the steam sang through the spout, he called to his foster-father, and, when answered, rolled the tub near the fire. Then he took his ax and walked a hundred yards or so up the slope behind the house. He selected a fine young pine, and soon the steady chop of his blows resounded through the early morning stillness, waking up the birds, who chirped him a gay good-morning.

A year had passed in that mountainside *shoji* — a year of many happenings. As the farmer had predicted, the soldiers of the Matsuyama had come and taken three-quarters of the rice crop.

Miyoshi had unwittingly protested, whereupon he was rewarded by a kick in the groin that had left him limping throughout the winter. Rennoske had not seen the black-armored men, for he was afield with Kiku.

The sight of the farmer, groaning and kicking on the floor, had set a new feeling coursing through the boy's blood. He hated himself for a week after, for he had been doing less work in the fields than he should have, having whiled away most of the time with pretty speeches for Kiku's ears.

"A little less play with a girl," he muttered scornfully to himself. "An hour quicker to return home, and I might have sent these blood sucking fiends rolling down the hill."

He had great confidence in his own strength, this nineteen-year-old boy. The fact that he had never seen a soldier and was unarmed never entered his head at all. The soldiers kicked his foster-father — *hei!* Offending soldiers were to be picked up about the waist and flung like quoits down the hillside. It was easy — at nineteen.

But the resolve to play less with girls did not long

remain a reality. Kiku smiled so prettily when he spoke, or cast down her head with a blush.

Once again neither old Japan nor a hard winter made any difference. Kiku was a girl — dainty, sweet, pretty. Miyoshi frowned on their being together much, so what could be more natural than that they should be together at every chance they could. We are still to remember, Rennoske was nineteen!

On this particular morning we find him chopping down the young pine tree, his head was full of Kiku San. Why not? The birds sang "Why not?" The ax thudded "Why not?" He thought so himself.

At last the tree was down, and he spent a joyful fifteen minutes sending it scampering down the hill. He bathed in the tub, dressed again, and, hungry, he squatted on the floor of the cottage before the traylike table, waiting for breakfast.

Now he could have eaten three more bowls of the millet; but he knew there was no more. What did that matter? He hated to see Kiku pick up those last few grains with her chopsticks and scrape her bowl. The sight made his resolve of the woods all the stronger.

"I must hie me to the fishing village this day ere the sun grows hot," explained Miyoshi after the meal. "There is a junk in the water I would see."

Kiku sniffed, whereupon her father scowled at her.

Rennoske wondered at this, but said nothing. His duty called him to the rice fields, so thither he went with a light heart, as light as his stomach was empty.

His feet had not been long in the water before Kiku came to help him. They worked in silence side by side, the thing that trembled on the boy's lips shut his mouth as those things will — at nineteen.

At first the lad thought it nothing; but the sound beside him, often repeated, made him look closely at the girl. She must have felt his gaze, for the sniffing changed to a soft sob. Yet her tiny fingers worked on.

"Gentlest flower," asked Rennoske then, "why dost thou grieve? Grieve not now, for I am happy, and it is because of thee I am so."

"Do you know, O Little Warrior," she faltered, "why my father goes this day to the fishing village of Boruku?"

This was irrelevance indeed. He answered:

"Perhaps for fish — perhaps for dried seaweed. Aught else?"

Kiku did not answer, bending her head over the nodding stalks. The boy heard her sob again. Why should she sob? *Hei!* Was this time for weeping? The sun shone bright, the birds sang — her father went to the fishing village, and she wept. Surely a maid was a strange, timid thing!

He kept his peace for an hour or two, but it would

not down. He tried, faltered, and failed; and so the morning and the afternoon wore on, while they worked there in the sunlight, side by side.

"Gentlest flower," he said at last, "thou and I have spent many happy hours together. We have wandered hand in hand by the mountain torrent, and seen the spray rise pearly in the moonlight. We have chased each other in the woods, happy in our childhood.

"Of thee have I been ever fond, Kiku San, and to prove I speak truly I will ask thy father for thy hand in marriage. Then will I really be his son, then shall I truly take his name to protect him from the soldiers in his age, to be a help always. The spirit of the now blessed man who brought me hither comes to me in my dreams and tells me thou art to be my wife. Art thou willing, Kiku San?"

"Aye," answered the girl, "willing as the mountain torrent to rush toward the sea."

"Then, why weepest thou?" the boy insisted. "I am here. I would be ever at thy side. Tell me, why weepest thou, gentlest flower?"

"Have I not said," cried the girl petulantly, "that my father went this day to the fishing village? And it is not for the dried seaweed, Little Warrior, not for the dried seaweed!"

She burst into tears.

"Why, then? Tell me, O Kiku. How dares any

one hurt thee?" the boy spoke imperiously. "They shall answer to the Fifty for this. Not one shall remain living upon the —"

He stopped suddenly, not realizing the purport of his own words. The girl, too, stared at him through her tears. Then, looking over his shoulder, she cried out:

"See — even now he comes!"

Dressed in his black, feast-day kimono, half covered by a cheap silk *haori* of gray silk, picking his steps in the unaccustomed straw sandals, Rennoske saw Miyoshi. Behind him stalked a tall man in a robe of bright blue with a scarlet sash.

His head was bare and newly shaved, his topknot dressed elaborately. As he approached Rennoske noticed that his face was dark from exposure to the sun, his little nose was turned up and pointed, and his eyes snapped and glowed with health under high brows. Rennoske wondered who he might be, Kiku's "Even now he comes" echoing in his ears.

"Why comest thou not hither and quickly?" snapped Miyoshi to his silent, motionless daughter. "Thinkest thou we shall come to thee, minx?"

Kiku stepped awkwardly out of the ditch, and with a little hop prostrated herself before the man in blue. With unassumed grace he bowed profoundly to her, while a scornful smile lit up his face, showing a row of white, even teeth.

Then, as the girl rose, he brought from the sleeve of his kimono a branch of cherry blossoms and handed them to her with another low bow. Rennoske, watching open-eyed, saw the spray but touch Kiku's fingers.

Even from where he stood he saw the fire that blazed from her eyes. With a swift movement of her tiny arm, she dashed the branch to the ground, scattering to the wind the artificial petals of pink.

Miyoshi gasped. The man in blue stared open-mouthed. Rennoske, scarcely knowing what he did, sprang out of the ditch.

Hesitating but for an instant, the girl stamped her foot, screamed with rage, then turned and ran toward the house, leaving the three men to stare at one another.

"How now, my son?" said Miyoshi, finding his voice. "Hast thou filled my daughter's head with frippery with thy smooth tongue that she should act like a disobedient jade? What means this outburst?"

Rennoske knew what it meant, or thought he did. He had spoken of love and marriage to the girl. It seemed to him as if he had been accepted. So out he blurted boldly:

"I have filled the head of thy daughter with naught that is dishonorable, O my father! It is meet she refuses the blossoms, for I have asked her

hand in marriage, and she would have no man but me, nor I any woman but her. It is simple."

"God of the Sea!" roared the man in blue. "Thou hast played me false, Miyoshi the Farmer! Thou shalt answer for this!"

Miyoshi at first dropped his jaw and opened his eyes in utter amazement. He stood in this mood for a second or two, when another light came into his eyes. His chest heaved slightly; then fast it moved up and down, till, opening his mouth, the sound of his laughter rang out.

"*Hei* — ho, ho!" he roared, shaking. "My daughter married to thee, thou hulking boy? And what wilt thou give her? Where wilt thou bring her if it could be? It can never be while this man lives — for to him she is betrothed, thou silly lad."

"Betrothed!" said Rennoske in a far-away voice. "Betrothed?"

Then, with a gurgling sound in his throat, he fell heavily forward on his face upon the ground.

"God of the Sea!" cried the man in blue with blanched cheeks, "I know death when it comes. Thy words have killed the boy."

"It is even as I thought when he first fell so," answered the farmer. "It is but a sickness he hath that comes at odd times upon him. Sometimes he falls as dead even as he did this moment; but

mostly he stares like a babe at naught and knows us not. Do not heed him, Osaki; he knew not of thee. Come, give me a hand with him. So, thou hast his arms. *Hei!* It is strange how he came among us."

"How was that?" asked Osaki as they carried the limp figure to the house.

Miyoshi told him of the coming and the death of Hida.

"But I cannot send him hence," the farmer explained as he passed the first of the round stone wells. "The dead man's eyes come to me in my dreams when I but think to do so. His spirit watched o'er the boy; he must be blessed."

"Yet an oath is an oath, Miyoshi the Farmer," said Osaki, as they passed under the cherry trees.

"And shall remain sacred, O Osaki!" said Miyoshi as they entered the house.

He laid Rennoske as before upon his bedding and placed the screen about him. Then, with a significant look at his daughter, who cowered by one of the corner posts, he snapped:

"Remember thou art but a girl, hence thou must obey. To thy task, and quickly, wench — *Isoge!*"

Quickly Kiku went, toddling out of the house and down the path to the rice fields. Soon her fingers were busy, and for a while her tears fell into the water that washed about her dainty ankles.

Osaki — her betrothed — forsooth! She hated him — she would not marry him. There must be some way out of that?

She dashed the tears from her eyes and stood up, thinking. After all, there had been no word of that. He had only given her the blossoms of betrothal. She had refused them.

That thought gave her courage — she could do so again. Thinking on, she decided against it. She must be wily and cunning, she must listen and find out what was in the wind. And Rennoske?

His words came quickly back to her. In fancy she saw him again standing beside her.

How strong, how noble he looked! His short pinafore was gray and dirty — it was not so to her. His words were slow and bashful — they did not seem so to her. How different from this silk-clad, perfumed sailor!

The sickness — that brought forth another tender thought. What were sicknesses to her? Would not she pray to all the gods to clear his mind from that? Could she not help him and work for him day by day?

Osaki, hunter of the seal, cold, sneering, scornful Osaki. He her betrothed — out upon it! All the laws and all the vows — aye, all the fathers upon earth — could not make her be his wife. She, Kiku San, loved Rennoske, and he — oh, divinely

tender, or gloriously beautiful, thought! —he loved her!

The sun set and Kiku toddled home again as her father, her mother, and Osaki were sitting down to supper. There was bean-curd soup, raw carp, rice, and bamboo sprouts, all the gifts of Osaki; but not for Kiku. A bowl of millet was plenty for a disobedient girl. She was made to go to bed before the drinking bout of hot *sakkee* before the meal was over, while her father and her betrothed ate, drank, and played chess in the light of six paper lanterns brought out for the occasion.

She lay there for hours behind the walls of paper, her mother asleep beside her. Her sleek, black hair, its dressing undisturbed by the pillow of wood, while her tired little body lay stretched out upon the wadded bedding. Soon her father's voice, slightly raised in tone from the effects of the wine, came to her listening ears:

"Thinkest thou, Osaki, I have been false to the vow I and thy father made when thou and my daughter were but children? Did not we swear by the blessed spirits of our ancestors —"

"May they ever guard and keep us from all harm," interrupted Osaki's voice.

"Aye," the farmer went on, "by thine ancestors and mine did we swear that my daughter should be brought a bride to thy house while we burned the

funeral fire outside our gate and gave her the robe of white to signify she was dead to us, and shall be borne from thee only as a corpse. Thus did we swear, Osaki."

"But the boy?" came Osaki's voice again. "He said thy daughter would have none but him, and he none but her. Thy daughter may refuse my first gift. I cannot force her to be my wife, nor will I."

Kiku San heard her father guffaw.

"And why dost thou pay heed to him, Osaki? Is he not my adopted son, and must he not obey me in all things? Moreover, were *shoji* to be had for the price of a fish-hook, he could not purchase himself a thatch roof.

"A penniless boy that is dependent upon me for his millet! Let thy fear sink in the sea, Osaki. My daughter shall be thy bride. She shall obey thy mother as a wife should. I am firm as Fujiyama upon that."

"Listen, then, O Farmer of the Three Wells." Osaki's voice came soft and low. "I go tomorrow to the cold and distant land of Yezo. Thither I go and farther to hunt the seal. Then shall I bring back many pelts and sell them. When the cherry blossoms are on the trees again, when the nightingale sings in the fir trees, then will I return for my bride."

"Many yen for thy sealskins," chuckled Miyoshi. "It is a bargain then, Osaki. Let us drink."

"Let us drink, then," Osaki answered; "my father-in-law that is to be."

Kiku heard the clink of the cups and drew a tiny hand across her eyes. But it was not to shut out the light that came yellow through the paper *shoji* walls.

Chapter X
The Wish for the Second Sword

RENNOSKE, hereditary *Daimyo* of the province, feudal lord of old Japan, awoke from his trancelike sleep an hour before the dawn. He knew neither his title nor his heritage.

He remembered clearly that he was the adopted son of Miyoshi the Farmer, and also why he had been ill again.

Kiku San, his little foster-sister, the companion of his boyhood, was the betrothed of the man in blue. So much for that and the sting of it.

Another thing was knocking at the gate of his brain — a strange desire. At first he could not fathom it; but as he lay there it came to him so clearly, so forcibly, that he must needs pay it some attention.

The desire was to take his sword and dash out the brains of Osaki, shake it threateningly at Miyoshi, pick up Kiku San under his arm and carry her

through all the land of Nippon till he had found his kin and his birthright, claim her as his bride before all, marry her, and live a life of ease and plenty. Always a sword!

So strong was the instinct that he sat up and felt beside him. There was no sword there. What wild fancy was it that made him think he had one? Where had he ever seen one? Not since he had been here under this roof? It must have been in that other boyhood, that boyhood that came now and then in strange flashes.

Yes, he was sure of it now, a long sword he had, the handle inlaid with gold. He would have it again — then let him beware, this man in blue!

All this was lost again in the usual morning bath, wood-cutting, and the rest till breakfast came. That, thanks be to the gods, was plentiful enough on account of the guest.

"I fear I cannot go with thee to the ship," said Miyoshi during the meal. "My side pains me and the walk is far, yet Kiku should not go alone."

"Yet what of the garments, my gifts to thee?" said the sailor. "A *juban* of silk, a wadded *shitagi* for the winter, and an *obi* of yellow for my betrothed, if she will deign to accept my gift. Then there is seaweed, bamboo, and spiced ginger, all in a great box. Who shall fetch them?"

"Cannot the boy go?" said the farmer.

Osaki raised his eyebrows, and showed his teeth in an insolent smile.

"Is he strong enough?" he said with a sneer. "I would not have him lie by the roadside for the girl to drag home."

It was in Rennoske's mind to tell the sailor that he was strong enough to thrust his words along his throat. Yet he choked his choler and answered firmly:

"I am willing to carry aught that you desire, my father."

The farmer and Osaki exchanged glances that said plainly: "He has changed his tune."

Osaki sneered and poohed, yet the upshot of the affair was that the boy was to go along.

Kiku dressed in her best traveling-robe of brown. All morning she was meek and docile, a sight that made her father congratulate himself on the effect of his discipline. Osaki was pleased to observe that she had not refused the offer of the sash.

At about eight o'clock the trio started off down the zigzag path down the mountainside. Kiku and Osaki walked ahead, while Rennoske, still in his short kimono, sash, and trunks, his sinewy legs bare from mid-thigh to foot, trailed on behind.

The boy was living keenly in every inch of his frame, his senses alert, for this was his first long trip out into the world; a jaunt to the temple, or

an hour or two of play at Takenaka, having been all he had ever known before. He drank deep of every sound, sight, and smell.

The road led him along the base of the mountain-side. On his right were dense woods on rising ground, the trees mostly pine, fir, and cedar, with here and there a maple. The roof of a cottage poked above the green, another showed in a green hollow, while the blue smoke from a round hut filtered through the cool shade.

These he knew were the homes of wood-cutters and charcoal-burners mostly, children of the forest. To his left the scene was as if he looked upon his own home, for there were the dikes of the rice fields, like steps of a stair, the heads of the workers bobbing up and down. Behind, where the mountain towered, a tiny cottage perched here and there like swallows' nests.

By noon they reached the fork in the road. On the left it led up to the village of Takenaka, whose roofs showed every shade and tint of brown above the green of the trees and the gray of the granite boulders that stuck up out of the earth, resembling a miniature Gibraltar. They took the other road, Osaki and the girl, the one to the right, and the boy followed on.

This path — for it was no more than a thin, brown rut through the fallen leaves of the forest — wound

in and out of black bogs and pools of stagnant water.

Rennoske saw mystery in everything. The fine tracery of a spider's web, the scarlet of sumac, a swooping hawk upon a robin — everything had so much interest for him that he forgot the man and girl who were his guides. He was surprised, therefore, to come upon Osaki and Kiku, standing upon the moss and fern-grown bank of a swollen stream that rushed, foam-white, and tumbling to a roaring fall, some fifty yards below.

"Look thee, boy!" said the sailor authoritatively as he came up. "Thou seest yonder log that lieth one end in this stream. It should be our bridge, for yesterday I crossed it. Now, as thou seest, it hath tumbled into the stream, and we cannot cross."

The seal-hunter looked Rennoske squarely in the eye, his own with the light of mischief in them. Then the brows came up, the lips parted, and the scornful smile was in the even teeth. He went on:

"Thou, my mighty lad, hast on no sandals. Were I the same, could I ford this trickle and lift yonder log to its place upon the bank. But the way is slippery; the torrent rushes free to sweep from under them the feet of those who dare brave its foaming rush.

"Thou hast not the strength nor the courage for such a deed, I fear; so it must be that I shall

do it, since thou art afraid. Boys were not so when I was one."

And Osaki sat down upon the bank and untied his sandal.

Every one of the seal-hunter's words struck Rennoske like a whip-lash. "Some talk while others do, Osaki," he answered. "Thou shalt walk dry-shod upon the bank." Then he leaped into the stream.

Kiku screamed and ran to the edge. Osaki, shooting out his arm, caught her by the kimono-sleeve and held her. He slowly let his eyes wander to the stream, and smiled at the struggling lad in the water.

"*Hei!*" he muttered. "Thus will the child of Nowhere be swept back to Nowhere. Thus do the waters serve me as they have ever done. Squirm and twist, wondrous boy! Call now to the spirit that watches o'er thee. So does he hear, O Kiku San?"

And Osaki laughed softly to himself.

"The spirit hears, Osaki!" cried Kiku, her breath coming fast. "See — he gains the bank — a little farther, Little Warrior — on, on — See, Osaki — he stands firm!"

Rennoske, instinctively balancing himself with outstretched arms, was indeed nearing the opposite bank. The white water lashed itself into a foam

about his hips, making a "V" of calm water on either side of his waist. Slowly he felt his way on uncertain feet to where the log lay, and the most difficult part of his task awaited him, for he must lift the log out of the water and raise it high above his head.

And now the rippling-muscled arms encircled the wet wood, the nails of his fingers dug deep into the slimy bark. Slowly the torrent gave it up, while the veins stood out on the boy's forehead like whip-cords.

He heard Kiku scream again as his foot slipped upon the bottom. He was off his balance now, his arms no longer keeping him from falling. He knew he must go with the current. This he thought in that minutest fraction of a second, while he felt the sole of his foot slide along the stone; then his heel caught between two other stones behind it.

Panting now with the effort, with a mighty heave the log came free from the water and thumped sodden, dripping a thousand bright drops upon the soft, black earth of the bank.

"Well done, brother!" That from Kiku was his reward.

"Hold it now till we pass over!" called Osaki. He picked up the girl in his arms, and planting his feet firmly on the log, he started to cross the crazy bridge.

But wo to those who hold their own deeds so

highly, and look so lightly upon the deeds of others. About midway between the banks Osaki, the sure-footed, slipped.

He uttered a yell of dismay, and the instinct of self-preservation strong within him, he threw out his arms to right himself, while the girl tumbled into the stream that boiled and hissed below.

But Rennoske had seen the plight of his "gentlest flower" none too soon. He caught the girl in his outstretched arms. When he looked up, Osaki was on the bank above him, holding out his arms.

"Quick, boy!" he called. "Give me the girl ere the current sweep you both away!"

Rennoske, in that swift moment, saw every detail of the scene about him. There was the bank, black-soiled and fern-grown. Behind it the dark, cool forest of pine, fir, and maple, stretched away in long aisles of black shadow, and sunlit patch.

There before him stooped the man in blue with the scarlet sash. Rennoske looked squarely into his terror-stricken eyes.

"And what if it did, Osaki?" he asked calmly. "Where wouldst thou be, and thy boasting and thy bragging and thy belittling of me in her eyes? Fooled Osaki, *hei*, how he trembles! Thou art fooled, Osaki, braggart and little-hearted man! See, we go!"

"Nay, nay, nay!" Osaki screamed, his mouth

working horribly. "Give me the girl! Thou serpent's brat! Thou unknown, nameless dog! Give me the girl!"

Rennoske laughed in the seal-hunter's face.

"Take her, then, white-livered fisherman!" he scoffed. "Take her, and that will stop thy quaking. So — carefully, for she hath swooned."

Rennoske stood dripping upon the bank. "What thinkest thou of the boys of nowadays?" he muttered. "Were they so when thou wert one?"

"I shall tell the deed at my wedding, boy. Wilt thou be there?"

There was a changed Osaki that led the way through the rest of the forest. They reached a white sandy road through a salt marsh in another half-hour's walk.

Rennoske came behind the sailor and the now chatting and laughing girl, swinging along with all the swagger of a wandering swashbuckler.

As the salt air tinged his nostrils he wished for more rushing torrents to ford, more maidens to rescue. Out of pure excess of youthful spirits he ran ahead, gave a cry as he leaped high in the air, turned, and landed on his palms, and sprang back again with the agility of a cat.

"Where learned you that cry?" asked Osaki, puzzled.

"'Twas the first that came to my lips," answered

the boy. "Hast thou heard it before? Tell me where, Osaki?"

But Osaki's face was like stone, while his eyes blazed upon the face of the boy. He did remember the cry — remembered it as coming from the lips of a *Samurai* upon a charging pony as he cut his way through a mob of rebellious fishermen.

Osaki's eyes blazed, for he knew his rival to be no witless boy, but a foe worthy of his steel. What he was remained a mystery. Yet he was more than the adopted son of Miyoshi the Farmer. That he knew — and dreaded.

The semicircle of the fishers' huts came into view through the grass. A little farther, and the sea stretched out before them, green, blue, and gold. At the end of a single sandspit the square sail of a junk was silhouetted against the dazzling water.

"See!" cried Osaki, pointing to it. "There floats my Maya Maru. A brave ship that fears neither the ice of the north nor the typhoons of the southern seas. Thou shouldst be a sailor, boy. They are the doers of brave deeds."

"Gladly would I be one, then," answered Rennoske. "Yet I fear my father would not have me go. The man who brought me bid him keep me until 'they' should come for me."

"And who are 'they'?" queried Osaki, frowning.

"So — that I know not," answered Rennoske. "See the strange birds!"

The boy's eye had been caught by four cormorant fishers who were taking the ungainly birds out of their baskets. One by one the fowls, each with a ring about its neck, to which a string was attached, were caught by the men, and their long bills opened and their gullets emptied of fish. Each bird shook itself and squawked, hopping back to its own particular basket like an old, lame hermit going to his cave.

Rennoske would have questioned; but a group of half-naked boys upon the beach again attracted his attention as they played at battledore and shuttlecock. It was with reluctance that he moved on after Osaki and the girl, his feet sinking deep into the sand.

Coming near the ship, he saw the sailors in their short pinafores of black with Osaki's name on each man's back in white characters. These bustled about with teak boxes, carrying them down a rickety gangplank. As Osaki came up to them, they prostrated themselves in the white sand.

"How goes the cargo, Iwashi?" he called to a sturdy fellow with a white kerchief about his forehead.

"All is ashore but the presents for the mountain, O captain," answered the man.

"Bring them to the lad here," snapped the seal-hunter, motioning to Rennoske. "Then sport yourselves, for there will be work enough for all ere midnight."

He turned to Kiku, and said suavely: "Wouldst thou see my ship, O maiden? The decks have never been trod by woman's feet. Perhaps luck will follow thy dainty tread."

"If I can bring it, Osaki," answered the girl. "I go gladly."

Osaki arched his eyebrows significantly at Rennoske, then, touching Kiku's finger-tips, he led her up the gangplank.

Rennoske stood on the sand, arms akimbo, legs spread far apart, looking out on the broad expanse of sea, dotted with the square sails of three or four junks and smaller moving specks of black that were the fishing-boats. He was awakened from a reverie by the soft voice of Iwashi.

"The captain bid me give to thee this box," said the sailor, laying the bamboo and teak thing at his feet. Rennoske nodded pleasantly, while the sailor stepped back a pace or two and stood eyeing him.

"How art thou called?" asked the man at length.

"Little Warrior, son of the Farmer of the Three Wells."

The sailor sneered at the word "farmer." Without another word he stripped off his *hara-gake* and

shirushi-hiki, and stood in his loin cloth, a muscular figure.

"I would cool myself in the water, Little Warrior!" he called banteringly. "'Yet methinks that thou, a farmer's son, canst not swim."

"That I know not," answered Rennoske, removing his own kimono and shirt. "Yet will I try with thee."

The man looked puzzled.

"Be careful," he said. "The water is many fathoms deep. Those who know not whether they can swim or not had best keep out of it."

With a splash he dived into the water. A second after him came Rennoske. Down under the green water he went. It roared in his ears, confusing him.

Then, coming to the surface, he struck out, face downward, arms churning over his head. His brain was awhirl as he shot ahead. He could swim, and well, for, glancing over his shoulder, he saw that he was drawing away from Iwashi. Where had he learned this?

They kept up their splashing until their feet touched bottom near the shore. Iwashi looked at the boy through water-beaded eyelashes.

"I gave not full rein to my strength," he said, puffing. "Let us race back to the ship."

"Agreed," cried Rennoske in boyish enthusiasm, and kicked himself free.

Iwashi had indeed checked his strength. Rennoske heard his puffing and splashing ever beside him. Soon there were shouts on the sand. The sailors had seen the race and were crying encouragingly to their fellow. But if Iwashi had not given full rein to his strength, neither did Rennoske.

Taking a full breath about a hundred feet from the shore, the boy sank his head deep into the brine, and thrashing his legs from the knee down, his arms plunged through the water with a swift downward sweep. He rose dripping on the sand and turned to find Iwashi yet in the sea, ten feet from the shore. There were shouts of derision as the sailor emerged from the water.

"Thy match is met, Iwashi," they cried. "There is one in all Japan who can defeat thee. Gods, what a stroke! Where learned he it?"

Something within the soul of Rennoske was wildly clamoring. He ran up and down the beach, his spirits seeming winged. Something in the pile of teak boxes near the ship caught his eye.

Three long bamboo poles lay on the beach. He picked one up. Why, he asked himself, did he grasp it at one end with both hands? Then the feeling he had at dawn came back to him. Surely this was the length of a sword and one swung it above one's head — thus! He cut viciously at the head of an imaginary foe.

Came Iwashi and the other five of the crew of the Maya Maru to watch the lad who had defeated their champion at swimming. What now were these wonderful actions? What did the magical boy do with this long bamboo pole?

"Come, Iwashi," cried the boy. "Pick up a pole and joust with me. Come, lest I crack thee over thy bald pate."

Now Iwashi, mate of the Maya Maru, was in no good humor, and even though he had never had a sword in his hand, he had seen many used.

"Impudent raiser of rice!" he yelled, seizing a pole. "I'll teach thee to make sport of Iwashi!"

With another yell he rushed at Rennoske, making a swinging cut at his head. But alas for hands that had never held a sword against hands that had been trained by an old soldier of Shikoku though they knew it not. The boy's pole parried and with a thwack, came down on Iwashi's shaven head, following with a poke in the ribs that sent the sailor sprawling.

Long and loud laughed the crew of the Maya Maru. Frantic were the struggles of Iwashi as he rose to his feet. Completely losing his head, he picked up the pole again and rushed madly at the boy, whirling the stick over his head.

This time Rennoske's pole cracked him soundly across the shins. Iwashi, mate of the Maya Maru, dropped his pole, howling. He had had enough.

"Try it. Then will you all find how easy it is," he whimpered to the laughing crew.

"He is but a boy, Iwashi," said one of them. "For shame to be beaten by a boy. Ho, ho!"

"So. A boy with a wrist of steel," Iwashi answered. "Try it, thou; then will I laugh myself."

The sailor tried indeed, and Iwashi laughed indeed, for the boy's opponent hopped ridiculously about on the sand, one hand rubbing his head, while he strove to rub his shins with the other.

Next two were tried at once. Try as they might, their poles could not come within a foot of Rennoske's head, while their own were cracked unmercifully.

"Gods of the Sea, what scurvy knaves have I for a crew!" boomed Osaki's voice from the gangplank. "A boy of eighteen to crack your heads and you cannot touch him two to one —*faugh!*"

Rennoske, with the joy of victory thumping in his breast and rushing to his temples, called back, "Try it thou, hunter of the seal! Or dost thou fear I will muss thy head-dress?"

Osaki smiled his insolent smile, and walking down the gangplank, took one of the sticks from the ground. With a firm grasp he held it aloft with both hands. "Come, braggart," he said through his clenched teeth. "Come, speaker of bold words, my queue will not be touched a hair. Come!"

The laughter of the crew changed to silent interest

as the sticks sounded hollow in the cut and parry. Round in a circle went the man in his flowing robes of blue and the lithe-muscled boy. The shadow of the great square sail of the ship moved an inch on the sand, yet neither had struck a blow. They ducked, thrust, parried, their eyes gleaming, breaths coming fast through parted lips.

Suddenly Rennoske brought his stick down with a resounding whack on Osaki's knuckles. With a howl the sailor dropped his pole of bamboo. Yet before the boy could lift his weapon, Osaki caught his uplifted arm by the wrist in a firm grasp.

"Thou art disarmed," whispered the boy.

"And thou art helpless," answered Osaki, his face close.

"Even so, but had I the second sword, I would pierce thy entrails, hunter of the seal!"

A sudden change came over Osaki's face, a look of a dog that has snapped at his master. His hand relaxed, his voice came in an awed whisper:

"I know not who you are — but what you are, I know full well!"

Chapter XI
The Sight of an Ugly Face

THE crew of the Maya Maru stopped their sport and were clambering up over the ship's sides, busy with rope, anchor, and rudder, for the order had been given to cast off.

Rennoske stood by the water's edge, again in his short kimono, the rising tide eddying and swirling about his bare feet. He stood spread-legged, lip between thumb and forefinger, pondering upon the seal-hunter's words.

Why had he so much and yet so little? Why the change from the familiar "thou" to the respectful "you"? Osaki was his elder. What wonderful revelation was behind that "what you are"?

Then the sword crowded this out with a sudden rush of thought. Where had he learned the use of it? for he could use it, and well. How did he know there should have been two of them? What did that imply? Try as he might, it meant nothing except baffling ponderings.

He could ford rushing torrents, rescue maidens, swim like a fish, faster than another known for his

speed in the water. He could use a bamboo pole so well that two to one could not harm him. Truly, as he mirrored himself in his own thoughts, by the light of his own deeds, he was a wonderful person.

His thoughts were interrupted by the loud voice of the master of the ship. The gentleman in question was evidently in a state of great excitement. Rennoske was surprised to see the gangplank being put down again and the great sail, that had been raised, creaking and squealing down again on her rings.

"And hast thou not seen her, dogs?" Osaki roared. "She stood beside me as I looked down upon thy sport. Drop again the anchor, clowns that ye are. Gods of the Sea, look not so stupidly upon me — search for her!"

Then it suddenly occurred to the boy on the beach that his conceit had made him forget Kiku. Where was the girl? He had not seen her since she went with Osaki aboard the ship.

His recollection of the seal-hunter's deeds of the morning gave him quite a qualm. Could it be that Osaki took this means of abducting the girl before his very eyes, thus putting an end forever to the rivalry?

He asked himself no further; but running to the ship's stern, he caught hold of a line and hauled himself, hand over hand, to the deck.

"A pretty deed is this, boy!" cried Osaki to him, as he clambered over the rail. "The girl is gone!"

"Then it is thou who hast done the foul deed, Osaki," Rennoske answered angrily. "Thou hast many tricks in thy bag, sailor. Why dost stand there gibbering, shamming a loss thou knowest thou hast not?"

"What mean you?" Osaki thundered, straightening his broad shoulders and glowering down at Rennoske.

"Ruffle not thy neck, gamecock," the boy replied, giving back deadly look for deadly look. "Thou hast hidden the girl in the ship and seek to fool me with cries and lamentations. Where is the maid? Tell me, lest I strangle the truth from thy lips!"

"Call me trickster upon the decks of mine own ship, puppy?" Osaki raved. "Threaten no threats that cannot be carried out. It is more of your doing to tell the girl to meet you in some secret place you both have appointed for her shame and for mine. Yet shall I follow you. Drop the anchor there! Haul down the sail! The girl is mine by oath — mine shall she be. Maid-thieving outcast, where is Kiku San?"

Words and the effect of words went to the winds. With a snarl and a leap, seal-hunter and farmer's son were at each other's throats. There was murder in their hearts.

"Who calls the name of Kiku San?"

Rennoske and Osaki, at the sound of the gentle voice, let go their hold and, panting, wheeled quickly. Standing demurely before them was Kiku.

"Where wert thou, maiden?" asked Osaki, the first to find his voice.

"In the depths of thy good ship, my lord and master that is to be," she replied, a quaver in her voice.

"And wherefore?" snapped Rennoske suspiciously. "Art thou so shameless as to stay on board unbidden?"

"The puppy presumes," Osaki sneered. "I deal with the girl, boy."

"Fret me no more," the lad answered, his choler rising again. "Enough have I stood of thy —"

"Nay, brother," Kiku broke in upon him. "I did but pray to Idzumo for a safe voyage and a quick return for my betrothed."

Neither traced the lie in her voice.

"See, boy," said he. "This is what comes of boasting in the ways of women. How think you now of your 'She would have no man but me'? Ho, ho!"

Rennoske turned to hide his blush of shame and walked toward the gangplank.

"A thousand bows of my head in parting," he heard Osaki say. "A thousand thoughts shall be

of thee till my eyes are blessed by a sight of thee again, O Kiku San."

"A thousand winds blow you through pleasant seas," answered the girl. "A thousand years shall it seem till you return again to me, Osaki."

Rennoske felt her sleeve brush his arm and knew she waited for him to lead the way.

For a parting shot he turned and glowered at the seal-hunter, who answered the challenge with white-toothed leer. Then he walked down the gangplank, Kiku's feet pattering after him.

On the full tide, the vessel soon drifted out on the sparkling water; slowly the great square sail rose and spread against the sun. Then, as it caught the wind, the junk turned awkwardly, showing her high, galleonlike stern. Soon she dwindled into a speck of black on the golden sea.

The boy stood watching her, his brain full of pictures, painted in brilliant hues by his imagination, of storms, typhoons, distant lands and wild beasts to conquer.

A sound from Kiku made him turn toward her. She was chuckling and laughing to herself, her tiny straw-sandaled feet beating a tattoo on the shining sand as if she danced with glee.

"Kiku, Kiku!" the boy called. "Thou art glad Osaki has left? Glad that thou canst be with me?"

Her laughter stopped short. She turned a pale, frightened face to him.

"Nay, nay," she faltered. "I am not glad — Inari bear me witness, I am not glad." And she fell to sobbing.

"Then thou grievest for Osaki," he went on, his own tone of anxiety changing at her negative reply to a question to which he had expected another and better answer. "Ships go and come. He will return — if that is what thou grievest for."

"Nay, nay, nay!" she answered, laughing now. "He will never return. It is thus that I prayed!" And she wept again.

Fording streams was play, swimming races with sailors nothing to brag of, fencing with bamboo poles a joke compared with this! He shouldered the box and turned his face to the mountains, wondering again upon the strange ways of women.

The boys had gone from their game as they passed the beach. The cormorants slept, as did their masters, tired from their night of toil. All was silent in the hot afternoon sun that beat down yellow on sand, marsh, thatch, and bamboo.

Rennoske trudged ahead while Kiku toddled behind, both as silent as the sleepy land and sea.

Again they trod the white, sandy road through the cattails of the salt marsh. Rennoske's head was bent by the load, his eyes on the ground.

Suddenly the pitter-patter of feet ahead of him made him look up. Down the road came a cloud of dust.

Out of it soon appeared six coolies, naked but for their loin cloths and white band about the forehead, running at top speed. Between the first and the last three, for they ran abreast, swayed a rickety palanquin. The boy stopped to look as the vehicle pattered by.

A man sat in it leaning far out, or rather half a man, for the creature was but three feet high. The face had all the animalism of an ape's, the lower lip protruded as he squealed and grunted to the coolies to go faster.

But a single glance had Rennoske of the deformed creature. That, it seemed, was enough. He dropped the box, screamed in terror, and ran down the road as though a tiger were after him.

The dwarf, too, turned, saw him, then frantically waved his long hairy arms and screamed for the men to stop. They, thinking it but a command to go faster, puffed and panted and ran on.

Rennoske, head erect, mouth open, hands clenched, ran along the road sending the dust flying behind him. He darted into the woods, stumbling and slipping through the bog-land.

At length, winded and worn out, he fell in a heap by the swollen stream he had crossed that morning.

There, dragging the box after her, a half-hour later, Kiku found him.

"Little Warrior," she called, stooping over and touching him on the shoulder, "why did you fly from me? There was naught in the litter but an ugly dwarf. Little Warrior — come — he follows not."

He opened his eyes and looked at her. There it was — the blank, stupid stare. The sickness had claimed him again.

There was no light of recognition in his eyes. It was here, but a few hours ago, he had forded the rushing stream — yes, here he had caught her in his strong arms as she fell. Swooned? Not she! She had heard every word of his glorious challenge to Osaki above the water that bubbled so close to her.

Why should Osaki know? Go with him in the stream? Aye, if it led to the seventh hell! Here he was, this man who had snatched her from death and unselfishly handed her back to his rival. Here was the man for her — here was a chance to help him as he had her.

Gently she bade him rise, he obeyed her. Gently she led him over the span and came back again for the box. Gently she led him home again.

When they reached their dwelling, Miyoshi sat upon the doorstep, his head bowed in his hands.

"Here are the presents, O my father," said the girl, quickly putting down the box beside him.

"Aye, and we will need them, girl," the farmer answered. "The soldiers of the Matsuyama have been here. All my rice from last year's harvest have they taken—all—all. Thy mother—gods!—she sought to hide from them the yen she had saved, and one, discovering them, struck her upon the mouth with his mailed fist. To Takenaka they went. Inari help the village when those black dogs have finished with it! What thinkest thou of that, my son?"

But a stupid stare was the only answer of Rennoske. Miyoshi the Farmer was not the only one who suffered at the hands of the house of the Mountain of Pines.

Chapter XII

Black Armor Seen in the Sunset

THE cherry blossoms had died long since, the wistaria faded. Now bloomed the chrysanthemum in clear-skied November. With a blaze of red and gold the maples dropped their leaves, and November died.

The pines shone a brighter green against the snow that fell now and then in December and January. In February came the plum blossoms, and the nightingale's song in March. It was almost time for the cherry blossoms to show their pink once more.

The winter in that tiny thatched cottage on the plateau had been a long and a hard one. The charcoal braziers were low, so the four inmates felt keenly the damp cold.

Food was scarce and coarse, for the last raid of the Matsuyama had taken nearly all. The cold settled in Miyoshi's bones, making his limp more pronounced, while an ugly scar disfigured his wife's lip, spoiling a quiet prettiness.

As for Rennoske himself, he never grumbled or

complained, though there was a smoldering something within his breast that made him afraid of himself o' nights. The sufferings of his foster-father was enough to bear; his own, nothing.

It was the sight of the thin, peaked Kiku that made his blood boil. For him, manhood was close at hand, if not present. He was twenty — leaner than before, it was true; but, with the lack of food and the excess of exercise, his rippling muscles had taken on a certain wiriness, while the hollows of his cheeks set off a firmer push to his jaw.

The cold had a good effect on him in one way, for the winter went by without a return of his malady. In the early dawn awakenings the longing for the sword came often, yet it was no longer on Osaki that he wished to use it, rather against the hated black of the Matsuyama who had lamed his father, scarred his mother, caused many a yearning in his own stomach, and made the chrysanthemum of his heart, his "gentlest flower," thin, sad, and pale. Yet, perhaps, the hatred was instinctive as well.

When the spring rains began oxen were borrowed from their neighbor up the mountain, Yatara, and with the help of some others the ground was plowed. The two cherry trees outside the house were a mass of pink, yet no word came from Boruku of the arrival of the Maya Maru.

At length, on the day of the Boys' Festival in

May, Miyoshi donned his new *haori* over his sea-green kimono, the gifts of Osaki, and, taking a stout staff, announced his intention of walking to the village in question. Rennoske and Kiku were permitted to go to the archery contest to be held on the lawn at Takenaka, so the lad started off, the girl trotting beside him.

"Think, gentlest flower," said he, as they trod the path, "there will be fish-kites flying from great poles, fish-kites high in the air to signify that this day the carp begins its swim up-stream, and the boy his battle of life. *Hei* — and the arrow-shooting! Will it not be a brave sight for thine eyes?"

But Kiku answered nothing; whereupon Rennoske wondered for the thousandth time upon the strange ways of women. He soon forgot his puzzle by taking one of the three stout bamboo poles he held under his arm and whirling it in the air. At the archery contest there might be one who thought he could use a sword. It was best to be prepared.

Long before they came to the green they saw the kites, high above the trees, swirling and floating in the soft spring air, turning now to this side, now to that, soaring and gyrating.

Of all sizes they were, mostly in the shape of fantastic fish, colored red and orange, blue and green, the scales traced in black. From where they stood in a little green hollow it looked as if they had found

themselves under a blue aquarium or that the fish had suddenly taken to the sky instead of the sea. A steady buzz of voices was borne to them on the breeze.

Gradually the maples, pines, and cedars thinned, and they came out upon the green. Such a sight! The lawn was diamond-shape; the point opposite to where they stood sloped upward, where the huddled brown of the houses showed where the village stood. They had seen the kites — they now saw those who held them.

There were boys by twos, boys by dozens, boys by the score. Some stood still, holding their strings and looking with ecstatic faces at their floating toys. Others ran up and down, pulling, twisting, turning round suddenly, dragging the kites after them, while the smaller boys, with still smaller brothers and sisters strapped squalling to their backs, ran up and down after their grown and privileged brethren, shouting and squealing with glee.

"Over there is the greater crowd," cried Rennoske, pointing to a long lane of many colored kimonos near a grove. "Come, Kiku, the shooting should be there."

And, never noticing whether she followed or not, he plodded through the grass, his cheeks burning with the fever of excitement.

He almost tripped over three tiny lads, their

heads shaven but for a bristling ring of hair on the top, squatting cross-legged on the ground.

"*Nan-kem-po!*" squeaked little fellow number one.

"*Nan-kem-po!*" repeated two little fellows numbers two and three.

They stuck out their hands from behind their backs. Little fellow number one held his fist tight, while the other two showed two fingers. *Hei!* Stone beats scissors! Little fellow number one screamed with joy.

"*Nan-kem-po!*" Rennoske heard it behind him again, but ran on. A long shout from the throng quickened his steps. There should be something strange and wonderful here surely.

Broad shoulders barred his way on the edge of the crowd. He nosed about until he found an opening, or, rather, what was as good as one, for finding one little old fellow looking on, the lad looked on himself over a shiny and wrinkled bald head.

The lane or alley was flanked right and left by myriad yellow faces, grinning faces, smiling faces. The pinched cheeks of them were lost in the holiday glow, yet the sparkling eyes were in hollow sockets like his own.

The hard winter had affected more than the inmates of Miyoshi's cottage — as these signs plainly

told. Starvation revealed itself in here a flapping kimono, there a tightly drawn sash.

But *hei!* this was a holiday in good sooth. Little sons, nephews, and grandsons shot for the prize. Give your peasant a fine day, a soft spring breeze, a crowd of his fellows straw-grasping at an atom of pleasure like himself, and he will forget his days and nights of gnawing hunger and bone-throbbing cold.

At the end of this lane, about a hundred feet from where Rennoske craned his neck, three round targets of straw stood against two knotty oaks, one above the other. The boys came in turn with their bows and arrows, and shot. As they hit or flew wide of the mark, a man at the far end looked and called back, "Zoru, son of Bashuda, hath made ten and ten and four."

The markers jotted it down, and another lad shot, and so on. Rennoske understood little of the rivalry or the score. But it was blood-stirring to watch the arrows skim through the air, so he watched on, content to listen to cries of encouragement and the boys' squeals.

It was Gentaro, son of the wagoner, who started all the trouble. Coming up behind Rennoske he playfully pulled one of the bamboo poles from under his arm. Equally as playfully he made to strike him across the shins. Gentaro received a thwack

over the head for his pains and had the pole knocked flying from his hand.

Now, it seems that there was an old soldier in the chattering, yellow-faced crowd, one O Kina, who had served in the Yezo war against the Ainu.

"Where learned thou that up-cut, young man?" he squeaked, his face close to Rennoske's.

"In truth, reverend sir," Rennoske answered, "I recall neither my parentage nor my boyhood. Yet this comes to me as easy as sleeping."

The old man puckered up his scarred nose.

"It looks like a Shikoku training to me," he went on. "I'll warrant my own Kiyushu slicing will break down thy guard, young man. Wouldst try a round with me?"

"So," answered Rennoske, "I will try willingly, if thy gray hairs can stand the heat of the exercise, for I move swiftly, reverend sir."

"So, thou art a confident cub," said the soldier, rolling up his sleeve. "Remember my arm has seen many years of service. Look to thine own pate."

"I look," cried Rennoske, and their sticks met.

Soon the *click-clack* of the bamboo reached many ears, and it was not long before a ring of smiling faces shone above a bank of holiday kimonos. Rennoske found that the arm that had seen many years of service was indeed a worthy one; but youth was on the side of the Shikoku up-cut. The old man was

disarmed, respect for his gray hairs saving him many a sharp rap on the head they covered.

Grave faces nodded approvingly. There were whispers of, "Who is the sturdy lad?" from those who had come from afar for the holiday.

Those of the neighborhood told, adding the usual: "Where learned the son of Miyoshi the Farmer the art of sword-play?"

Coaxed and shamed by ambitious fathers and brothers, many other lads tried their hand. They met the fate of the sailors of the Maya Maru at Rennoske's hands, even two and three to one.

If the joy of victory had raised high Rennoske's spirits upon the sands of Boruku, it now made him drunken, thumping in his breast and rushing madly to his temples. The hereditary lust of battle overpowered all else, and he cried aloud:

"Children of the Rising Sun, why stand ye here idle while the soldiers of the hated Matsuyama rob ye of your hard-earned rice?"

His own words frightened him. They seemed to be put into his mouth by some unseen spirit.

"What use is the bow and arrow to your children unless the shafts go straight into the hearts of these accursed warriors? Rise up, children of the Mikado! Rise up and overthrow the *Daimyo* Kuroki Obuto! Let a wiser ruler reign in his stead. What say you, sturdy men and boys of Old Nippon?"

Now, here was talk to set heads a-wagging! Old men gasped; horny-handed farmers whispered, "Men have been beheaded for far less than this." There were loud cries of "Treason!" and "He is a madman!" Yet these were answered by the sullen guttural murmur of the younger men. One fresh-faced farmer's son even cried out:

"There should be more of this talk, boy!"

"Thou hast the head of a sage on thy broad young shoulders," said another.

Whereupon their elders silenced them with threats. Yet the seed was sown. Nothing else was talked of from then on but the indignities all had suffered at the hands of the Matsuyama.

The great kites in the shape of carp were forgotten; the children ran free. The young men crowded about Rennoske, talking and expostulating in fiery words. Ever to feed the flame, the old soldier took up the talk of rebellion. He would train them and the young warrior of the bamboo poles should be their leader.

In vain did the old men shake their heads. The day was but a hubbub of angry voices. The seed was sown.

Here a bronzed fisher slapped his calloused palm with a clenched fist. "Who were the Matsuyama indeed but usurpers?" he demanded in a loud voice. "What chance had honest fisher folk when

they were taxed nine and eighty yen a year to keep the Black Boar in drunkenness?"

"Nine and eighty?" piped the wagoner. "From me they take a hundred and ten. What with such little frost and less rain, it has been three years since that much I even made. Is it just that a man shall save his neck by giving up the money come to him in his wife's dowry? Rebellion — ? There is cause for regicide, my brethren!"

"There was a time," a woodman chimed in, "when we folk worked but till sunset. Now we must e'en labor after dark, winter and summer. Fifty logs of perfect pine must be given and hauled by every man — Aye, and my son reaching eighteen and I muster his help — *hei!* He is a man, too, in the Matsuyama's eyes, and there shall be fifty more, for the Black Boar builds palaces, the Black Boar builds strongholds and *godowns* for his stolen rice, and we must pay for it. We, the Children of the Ax, chop down trees for him to build palaces for his geisha."

Set fire to paper and there will be always wind to fan it. Hurl a stone ever so carelessly at a beehive and it will hit to set the swarm a-stinging.

The recital of woes and the talk of wrongs had but filtered through that mob of shouting and expostulating peasants, when a cry rose from them and many faces were turned toward the village.

"See — the Matsuyama are upon us now!"

A hush spread over all and all eyes were turned toward the break between the trees where the path leading to the huddled houses began.

From out of it a bare-legged man ran, or rather he staggered, swerving from this side to that, his arms over his chest, the hands tearing at a black thing that stuck there. Clanking clumsily after him, came four soldiers, each with a drawn sword. The setting sun lit up shiny patches of their armor of black, giving them a bloodlike sheen that struck terror in the hearts of the holiday makers.

On came the man, blinded by blood and terror. He crashed into a boy who had not been quick enough to get out of his way. The boy screamed — so did the man, staggering still more, he rushed headlong into the now babbling crowd.

A few feet from where Rennoske stood, the man threw out his arms, whirled, while his ankles gave way under him, and then fell prone on his back. The boy had seen the black thing that stuck bloody in his breast — it was a long arrow, the point lost in the torn folds of his short kimono.

Yet before Rennoske or any of the peasants could reach him, the first soldier was upon him and thrust the point of the long sword deep into his bared throat as he lay.

A shrill cry of anger rose up from the throng at

the sheer brutality of the thing. A sickening shiver ran through Rennoske's frame at this, his first sight of human blood. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

"Hold back our father," a shrill voice rang out. "They have slain his first-born. Hold him back, brothers. Let us deal with these black butchers!"

Into the ring formed about the body by the bank of kimonos, a young man sprang. Rennoske saw that he was but twenty-odd, attired as was the dead man. Following closely after came four more, all brothers they looked, with a little over a year of difference in the ages of each.

"The sons of the Tapper of Laquer Trees," Rennoske heard some one say close to him. "Brave lads and sturdy. There shall be more blood spilt here."

"Men of Takenaka," the soldiers shouted, "thus do ye see what comes of disobedience to your *Daimyo*. Stand back there, cub!" he growled to one of the boys who had come quite near. "Would you have some of the same sauce?"

"Demon-sent swine!" growled the boy, shaking his fist. "At them, brothers — bear them down!"

He rushed, followed by the other four. A sweep of the soldier's sword knicked him in the wrist, sending the blood spouting, while one of his brothers fell with a long gash in the thigh.

"Stand back, rebellious dogs!" cried the soldier while the other three armored men closed about him, all standing back to back. With the long sword they swung from right to left with the full swing of their arm while the other arm, holding the shorter sword, swept in the opposite direction. This windmill of sharp steel slowly crept forward, while the peasants fell back in silence.

"Hath no one the courage of a cat?" roared a voice.

A man of fifty stumbled forward, dragging with him three more boys, who sought to hold him back. His broad shoulders twisted to shake off the six arms that sought to stay him.

Father struggled with sons, who tried what they had failed to do. Still the four soldiers moved steadily forward, the steel glistening pink — ever backward moved the crowd.

Whoever told Rennoske what to do — what it was that prompted him — he never could tell. He remembered hearing of the trick of the flying wedge of swords. He remembered how one had told him how it was defeated. He knew how — what mattered who the teller was?

He stood his ground until the soldiers and their shining ring were within a yard of him, then, like a man plunging into the water, he dived head first for their ankles. He felt the cold steel of the shin-

plates in his hands the instant his feet touched the ground.

A sudden jerk and the bewildered face of the soldier lay under him. It was the work of a second to catch the wrist that held the short sword and force the point of it into the lacings of the gorget. The black-armored soldier of the Matsuyama lay squirming on the ground swordless and with a neatly severed jugular vein before he had time to look upon the face of his assailant.

The long sword in his right hand, Rennoske rose to face another soldier on one knee, for his trick had sent all four sprawling. The man jumped up and crossed blades with him, expecting but little trouble from a peasant with a long sword. He swung for Rennoske's head, had the blow parried, and got a wound in the shoulder for his pains. He tried a cut for the legs to find that parried, too. He was wondering how Shikoku training was to be found thus on Takenaka green, fighting like a wildcat the while.

He let out a yell on recognizing the face of his deposed *Daimyo*, and in the next instant, recognized nothing at all, for the top of his own helmet pierced sharply through his skull from a full-armed swing of a good sword, and he knew neither houses of Matsuyama nor Ackagawa, armed peasants, nor Shikoku training.

Rennoske, now in that state of madness made possible by easily earned victory, saw another sword out of the corner of his eye, made a back-hand swing at it, and sent it flying through the air. He drew back his own blade to let the owner have the benefit of its point; but paused in time. The man that faced him was unarmed and unarmored, one of the boys who had so interested him before the fray.

"Who art thou," cried the boy, staring, "that thou shouldst risk thy life in a quarrel that is mine and my brothers'?"

"They call me Little Warrior, son of the Farmer of the Three Wells," answered Rennoske, smiling. "I risked but little — the trick is simple enough when one knows."

"And where learned you the use of the sword?" asked another of the brothers, coming up.

"That I know not," answered Rennoske, smiling still. "Wouldst try thy hand? I am ready, sword or pole, in play or to the death."

"Gods about us — nay!" the second brother replied, making a wry face. "My first brother lies dead, my fifth and seventh wounded. There would be more in the spirit land but for thee. Should we now turn quarrelsome for naught? It is enough that our heads will tumble if this come to the Black Boar's ears."

And he pointed to the four armored men stretched grotesquely upon the now red grass. "Aye, and thy head, too, Little Warrior."

"Who hath finished the other two?" Rennoske queried, his fingers fitting familiarly about the hilt of his sword.

"We five lads here," answered the first bare-legged lad. "That was but an easy matter after thou hadst shown us the ankle trick. See, our father comes to speak with thee."

The Tapper of Laquer Trees advanced upon Rennoske with quiet dignity. He bowed profoundly, his broad shoulders almost touching the grass. He rose again and spoke solemnly:

"Little Warrior, this day lost I one of my eight sons at the hands of the Matsuyama. Well might I have lost more but for thee and thy courage. Consider, therefore, from henceforth, my seven remaining sons ever at thy service. Many offered sympathy, many pitied; but none helped. This day a man hath come among us."

"Reverend sir," Rennoske replied boyishly, "it is with difficulty I seem to answer questions concerning myself. It is hard for me to see into myself with clearness. Know, then, that a certain hatred for the armor these men wore fired my sudden fury more than the cause of thee and thy sons.

"Many words had I spoken this day, fraught with

wild and boastful saying. It was but meet that I do that which would make me not a braggart in the eyes of the good people of Takenaka. But four of the black-armored knights showed themselves this day among us. When more come and I vanquish them, then shall it be time for praise."

In the gathering darkness the Tapper of Laquer Trees turned his head slowly to the right, to the left, then behind him. He seemed satisfied that no one overheard, yet he whispered the words:

"By yonder oaks where stood the targets, O Kina and many other brave hearts meet to talk of these grave things. Join us with the coming of the stars. Move warily through the crowd — there may be spies. Thou comprehendest?"

Rennoske nodded and turned upon his heel. Most of the crowd had gone to their homes in silence, most of them with frightened hearts, for the slaying of four Samurai presaged more blood and persecution to come.

The kites were down, the children tucked in their beds. Yet there were many who stayed about in little groups, discussing the terrible events of the day.

As Rennoske swaggered unconsciously in and out among them, there was ever a nudge to a neighbor and a whispered, "There is the brave lad," and an answering, "'Tis a pity one so young should risk

his head. The Matsuyama will seek him out for this."

"Aye," another would whisper, "the Matsuyama are strong and terrible in the land."

Some of this the lad heard, some he did not; but none of it moved him. A great joy filled every inch of him. He had a sword, a sharp sword that he had used and found a friend. He strolled along, sticking the point of it into the ground as he walked, thinking brave thoughts and slaying many unseen enemies.

He walked to the shade of a maple and looked out over the lawn, now covered by the first soft blue shades of night. There were but a few straggling figures upon it and they slowly wended their way toward the village. He looked up through the leafy network above his head. The stars were coming out.

They sat in a ring by the two oaks, fifty or sixty men. He recognized O Kina, the old soldier, who was talking now in his cracked voice, telling them how easily a rebellion would be started, and, like a stone rolling down the snow-covered side of a mountain, would gather as it went.

The Tapper of Laquer Trees was there with his seven sons. Between him and them Rennoske sat. The talk was of great interest to him. The recital of the many wrongs stirred his blood. The plans

of deeds to do he drank in like a thirsty man at a well.

He was interested, keenly interested. So much so that he did not feel a gentle tug at his kimono sleeve. Often it came, then it stopped, and a sigh went with the stopping. It was Kiku San.

She heard the angry words, the grumblings of hate, the vows of vengeance. She saw the sparkle of eyes in the starlight. Was it not her Little Warrior's eyes that gleamed the brightest?

The purport of their words meant but little to her. She knew that it was late, and she was cold; knew that she was forgotten, too. She tucked her tiny arms under her sleeves, snuggled her chin into the collar of her kimono, and trotted home alone.

It was quite late when Rennoske arrived at the *shoji* upon the tiny plateau, with its three stone wells and the two cherry trees before it. He had hid his sword under a shelving rock on the way to the village, and covered it over by a heap of brushwood. He was surprised to see Miyoshi sitting by the doorstep, a *shoji* wall slid back behind him.

"Fine holiday-making have we here," Miyoshi cried, jumping to his feet at sight of his foster-son. "Prowling round o' nights — *hei!* Art studying the ways of bandits, boy? So, take this for thy nonsense."

And the farmer thwacked him soundly over the legs with a cudgel.

Rennoske jumped and dodged past the old man, laughing the while. A stream of "hulking boy!" and "lazy swine!" and "presuming puppy!" poured from the old man's lips as he limped about after the ever-dodging boy, his stick missing a score of times.

"Where wert thou lagging and what didst thou do at this hour?"

"You should embrace me instead of whipping," answered Rennoske brassily. "This day have I slain two Matsuyama swordsmen single-handed."

The farmer raised his hands above his head in comic supplication.

"The gods bear witness," he moaned, "if the boy hath not lost what little sense he had. Slain two of the Matsuyama he says — *hei!* The moonbeams are in his head. The flowers of the night make him dream.

"First, Osaki comes not; now my son is crazed. What have I done that such wo comes upon me? Slain two of the Matsuyama indeed! To bed, hulking lad, and sleep off thy moon-drunkenness. *Hei!* he hath a fox! *Hei!* the boy is daft!"

Miyoshi howled while Rennoske slid back the *shoji* wall of his compartment, rolled himself in his bedding, and was soon fast asleep.

"Slain the Matsuyama!" Miyoshi kept on bawling. "Slain the Matsuyama!"

But Kiku San heard, and knew who spoke the truth. High on his pedestal climbed her hero, while Osaki faded away.

Chapter XIII
A Rolling Stone of Hate

KIKU SAN was blessed with three things — beauty, youth, and an overwhelming love. Balancing the scale, she was cursed with three, or so she considered them — a conscience, a keen ear, and a heart-burning faculty of borrowing trouble. The second curse was subservient to the first, for the conscience keeping her awake at night, the keen ear heard things. From both she borrowed the trouble.

What was on her conscience shall appear hereafter; what she heard shall be learned now.

She lay awake one night, about a week after the holiday and the fray. The conscience was giving her a terrible battle, a battle that called for a sacrifice of her life perhaps. The one side said to keep quiet about the thing, the other bade her tell all.

She was just coming to a compromise, which included the telling of the thing to the one in the compartment of paper next her, when she heard that some one move. She had not lived under this roof with her Little Warrior for all these years without

learning that he slept like a log. Why, then, this scraping?

She heard a dull thud, that must be his knee on the floor. She next distinguished the scrape of straw on straw. That told her plainly that he was putting on his sandals. Ominous other noises told her that he was dressing himself, and, worst of all, she heard the frame creak and slide back.

She knew that the paper to right of her led to the rear of the house, the one to the left to Rennoske's room, the one at her head was where her father lay, and the one at the foot of her bedding opened on to the side of the house facing the path to the rice fields.

She more than heard; she saw this wall slide back a little. There was enough light for her to see the doubling of the paper. A slight creak and it slid back again. She heard a soft step in the grass, several other hurried ones farther away — then silence.

Sitting bolt upright in bed, her trouble-borrowing sense made her wonder what was to be done about this. Her Little Warrior had risen up in the night and dressed himself, sneaked out of the house, and gone in the direction of Takenaka.

What should she do — wake and tell her father? That might make the boy angry when he returned. Would he return, or was he gone for good, tired of

this narrow farm life? He was young and strong, and the world was wide. He had nothing there but labor in the rice fields and charcoal burning in the evening. How could she expect to keep him there, this great godlike boy?

It was some time since he told her of his love; never since he knew she was the betrothed of Osaki. Had he indeed gone forever out of her life? The thing on her conscience cried double shame, for it was for him that she had done it.

Kiku San spent that night shivering under the coverlet, her ears alert, yet hoping against hope for the returning footstep. There was trouble enough without her borrowing it now.

Still the thing on her conscience fought on. In the silence of the night she made a vow to the gods that if he would but return to her she would tell him all and take what came of it without a murmur.

At the fiftieth repetition of her prayer she was rewarded by a soft rustling in the grass outside the *shoji*. Yes, the paper moved back as before; there were the same scrapings in the room next hers.

Inari and all the gods be praised! She heard distinctly through the thin paper walls that separated them the soft, steady breathing of her Little Warrior. She fell asleep herself, content.

She was a clumsy girl in the rice fields that next morning. Often her father reproved her. The

whole four worked among the green stalks, for this was transplanting time. The farmer found occasion to prod Rennoske, too; the boy seemed unable to keep his eyes open. *Hei*—what was wrong with these two laggards?

Rennoske's fault was plainly from lack of sleep, while the girl developed a certain shyness whenever she looked at her foster-brother. She was glad when the day was over, gladder because she had no chance to speak to him.

That night she heard him sneak out and come back again. This state of affairs continued for a week. At the end of this time the girl was having another sleepless conscience-battle that continued far into the night. She heard the boy's steady breathing close to her and knew he slept soundly.

A sound, oft repeated, found its way into her semiconsciousness. It was the hooting of an owl. It seemed strange to her that the bird should come so near the house. They stayed, she knew, higher up upon the mountains.

Louder it grew with every moment, until it seemed outside the *shoji*. She heard Rennoske stir uneasily, followed by the usual scrapings; and after these the frame slid back at her feet. Moving as silently as she could, she crept along the matting, and when the *shoji* wall slid back again she opened her own a tiny crack.

Outside the moonlight streamed on grass, well, and tree. She could see nothing at first but the creeping boy, who was by this time about thirty feet from the house. On all fours he went, slowly and stealthily.

The owl hoot sounded again. She heard an answer. Then from the grass, behind the trees out of the very earth, it seemed, men sprang up. She saw that one or two had swords; but the arms most of them carried were spears made of long poles with knives lashed to the end, while three or four had broadaxes.

They saw Rennoske making his way toward them, so they turned, waving him to follow on. Kiku watched them steal along in single file, the moonlight making odd black shadows on the ground behind them. Soon she saw Rennoske again. He was coming after them at a dog-trot. As he turned the corner there by the boulder something he held gleamed in the silver light, gleamed brightly. Kiku saw that it was a long sword.

She hid her head beneath the coverlet to drown her soft sobbing. Dawn was breaking when the frame slid back and the heavy breathing was beside her through the paper walls again.

With the morning came a fine drizzle of rain. At the scant breakfast Miyoshi complained of his hip, but limped off to the fields in spite of it, his wife

coming with him. Rennoske and Kiku followed behind at a little distance.

The scene of this morning, where every bush and tree was rain-pearled, brought suddenly to the girl's mind the dew of the night before.

She tried to choke down the sob; but on seeing the boulder of granite, where but a few hours before Rennoske stole by with the sword in his hand, the sob came, turned into a choking sigh.

"What grieves thee, gentlest flower?" he whispered tenderly. "Why art thou sad?"

Her father and mother were out of sight behind the rock, so she ventured timidly:

"There is that which lies heavy on my heart, Little Warrior."

"I know," he answered cheerfully.

She looked oddly at him.

"Osaki comes not — what of that? Have patience, ships go and come. Perhaps he will be here with the wild rose, or e'en when the chrysanthemums bloom again.

"There will be another singing of the nightingale. There are contrary winds and angry seas. Perhaps he is held back."

"It is not for Osaki I grieve," the girl answered.

"Kiku San!" was borne through the rain.

"Come, gentlest flower," Rennoske said, catching

her by the hand. "Thy father calls. Grieve not unknowingly. Come, be gay!"

And he pulled her along, passing the boulder at a trot. Instantly she thought of the night before again, for he had passed here sword in hand at this same pace.

Why, she asked herself, must he of all men remind her of Osaki? Was it not enough that her conscience pricked her by the hour, ever calling the figure of the seal-hunter before her mind's eye? Must he, the prime cause, add salt to the wound?

"Lazy wench!" Miyoshi was thundering in her ears now. "And thou, too, hulking boy! To work and quickly — *isoge!*"

In a minute four backs were bent in the rain, while eight hands were busy among the young, green shoots, pulling and weeding, throwing away and planting again.

Toward noon Miyoshi complained of his hip and feared to work longer. He climbed out of the ditch, Kiku watching him out of the corner of her eye. She saw him scrape the mud from his ankles, put on his sandals again, and turn toward the house; but she was thwarted in her desire. Her father turned and called back, while her heart thumped madly at every word.

"Come, wife, to the house. Let these lazy two

finish the day at the task. The rain is chastisement enough for them."

Kiku watched her father and mother walk slowly up the path, round the boulder, their somber kimonos disappearing from view, swallowed up by the misty rain. She was alone with her Little Warrior!

After an hour of silence she wondered what had been her fear, for the boy never said a word. Indeed, his mind was busy, for the rice plants to him were no rice plants at all, but armed peasants, each placed at an even distance from the other. He hummed them a war-song as he did so; he smiled as they stood up straight under the rain.

"Art thou not tired?" she ventured, watching him; for his fingers had begun to slow at his task. The reason was that his brain worked fast.

"Why should I be?" he answered vaguely, without looking up. "The task is simple."

Kiku could have deluded herself into believing that she had done her part of the bargain. Left alone with Rennoske and given the opportunity, she had begun the conversation, with the result already shown: Rennoske going on with his task, paying no heed to her.

But as has been shown before, Kiku San had a conscience. She had promised her gods something if they would grant her a boon. The boon was granted — her task lay yet before her.

The rain might soak her to the skin, the fog envelop the valley below her; but this time the little voice within her that cried "Tell, tell!" would not down.

Yet there was that to be found out before she told. She knew the man beside her to be honest, upright, and straightforward. The telling might and probably would make him shun her like the unclean thing she felt herself to be. He would cast her from him — good. She would know what he meant to do first.

"You should be tired, Little Warrior," she began timidly.

"Why so?" he answered.

"You have had but little sleep these twelve nights past."

Rennoske yanked a rice plant clean from its roots, held it still in his hand while he stared at her. She shivered under his gaze.

"Thou knowest then?" This in a far-away voice.

"I know."

"And thou hast seen?"

"Aye."

"How much?"

"Last night I saw when they came for you, all else I heard."

"Thou wilt not betray us?"

The words, snapped so suddenly, caught Kiku off her guard.

"How can I betray that which I know not?" she answered.

He looked relieved. She saw him hesitate, holding his lip between his thumb and forefinger, as of old. Her woman's instinct told her a lie and the truth fought for mastery of his thought. It was the truth she wanted — let him not dishonor himself to save her pain; it was the truth she wanted, so she cried out for it.

"I am a daughter of Nippon, Little Warrior. I betray naught that man may deign to tell. Tell me where you go. Is it for war? Do you seek to leave my father's house?"

He looked her in the eyes and answered firmly yet simply:

"Aye, gentlest flower, it is for war, and in time will I leave our father's house."

She swayed a little on hearing the expected. A dry little sob quivered in her throat while her eyes were tear-dimmed through the rain. The sight of her swept away the throbbing of war-drums that buzzed all day in his ears. She looked so frail, so loving.

"Gentlest flower." His words were soft and tenderly spoken. "Little Warrior I am called. Little Warrior shall I be, O Kiku. A hatred of the

Matsuyama burns within my breast, and there are many wrongs to be righted — aye, more than are leaves upon the maple. My brothers have chosen me to lead them. I know no other way than that I should draw my sword and go forward to the foe."

Kiku sobbed again.

"Yet why shouldst thou grieve? Thou art the promised bride of Osaki. When I return victorious, thou shalt have drunk the nine times nine times in his house. I shall then be ever a brother to thee."

"Nay, nay, nay!" cried the girl. "I want him not — nor is it for a brother I want thee!"

"I am sorry, then," he answered, not understanding her true meaning, "I cannot bring him back."

"Listen, Little Warrior," came the girl's voice in a tense, tragic whisper. "Call me what you will. Tell my father and let him slay me. This burden I cannot bear longer on my soul lest it crush me.

"That day I was upon the Maya Maru — remember — you and Osaki each cried to the other that I was stolen. I came to the deck with Osaki when the crew and yourself were at the fencing. I saw him go down for the trial with you.

"Then it seemed an evil spirit came to me as I stood there, whispering: 'Thou needst not marry Osaki, whom thou hatest. There is a way out, if thou wilt but take it.' It was you I desired, Little

Warrior, more so than ever when I saw you vanquish the crew.

"I crept down into the very bowels of the ship — none saw me. It was dark there. Great rats scurried about and squealed. I crept over many boxes and hard things. My hand struck one. I felt it. It was a great, sharp knife.

"Need you know more, Little Warrior? With mine own hands I cut and dug and scratched until I had made a hole in the wood. I felt the water trickling, trickling down. I was cutting still when I heard the angry voices, and came up. You remember the lie that came from my lips when I prayed for Osaki's ship?

"Now you know why I weep, Little Warrior. I weep not for Osaki. He is dead! I have murdered him. It was for you, Little Warrior, it was for you!"

Kiku San waited. There was no answer from Rennoske.

"Do you forgive me? Will you tell my father?" she went on. "I care not—I will have none of Osaki — I will marry you or no man."

Still Rennoske was silent. She dared all and looked at him. He was staring down the mountainside. She crept over and looked down.

Toiling up the hill she beheld a tiny man — a dwarf. Upward, ever upward he came, through the fog and driving rain.

"What is it?" she asked.

She looked at his face. His eyes were open wide in terror, the veins in his neck stood out like whip-cords. She heard him snarl like a wild beast, then she saw him run swiftly up the mud dike. He came back again with a heavy stone and placed it upon the very edge of the slope.

With a cry of hate he pushed the rock over the steep incline. At the cry the creature below looked up. It was the ugly dwarf that had passed them in the litter. Fascinated, she watched the stone as it bounded down.

It struck. There was a yell of pain. Two hairy arms were thrown up. Then the thing lay still!

Kiku, horror stricken, turned her face again upon Rennoske. There again were the staring eyes, the blank, childlike face.

"Little Warrior — Little Warrior!" she called, tugging at his kimono sleeve. "Did you hear my tale? Do you know your gentlest flower is a murderess? Did you hear?"

She knew the signs of his malady, and rose and gently led him home. Had he heard her? Was it that which brought on the fit? Who was the dwarf? Why had he hurled down the stone?

She looked back to where the body lay. It was moving! It raised its head, turned, and — crawling, crawling — went slowly down the hill.

Chapter XIV

A Broken Sword in the Forest

ONCE again it was spring, and the cherry blossoms were pink clouds against the tender green of the valley and the blue of an April sky.

The mountain torrent roared, for the water was white to the overflow from the melting snows of the towering mountain.

Rennoske of the house of the Red River, hereditary *Daimyo* of the province, was twenty-one; another winter had slipped by in the *shoji* of Miyoshi upon the tiny plateau. There is no need to tell again the story of that winter; it was the same as the one that had gone before it — scant food, little warmth, lack of proper clothing.

Never was the nightingale's song more welcome, never the rays of the sun a gladder sight as they stirred the sluggish blood of the elders and brought new life into the veins of the young.

Yet things had happened — unknown, stealthy things — for those that had eyes to see them. Miyoshi's eyes were dim, else he could have plainly

traced footprints in the mud about his house o' mornings or seen tracks in the snow.

Kiku did not need to see them — she had ears to know what was going on. She had heard the words of Rennoske, "It is for war," and had understood, though she dreaded the time she knew must be close at hand.

As for the promise to her gods, she had done her part of that and told. Whether the man had heard she knew not. She could never bring herself to tell him again, even if she had had the opportunity; which she hadn't.

Rennoske himself had been a year free from any sign of his sickness, leaner, yet mightier muscled than before. The boyishness was still in his fine eyes, but with it came a settled look, a look of authority. He was a born leader, for heredity will speak, no matter how environment seeks to crush it out. His ancestors were noblemen and fighters for generations untold.

Hampered by a strange malady, his heritage unknown, his position in life little more than a bond slave, yet he had the knack of command, the gift of forcing attention when he spoke.

Under his foster-father's roof he obeyed the farmer in all things. By two oaks on the lawn at Takenaka it was he who was obeyed, for a reason none knew. His were not the only tracks through the snow nor

the only footprints in the mud. Many by-paths led to Takenaka; many feet had worn a familiar path. It was for war.

The *shoji* walls were only partly up on this particular night, for the air was warm. The cherry trees looked white in the moonlight, the shadows of twig and branch black on the grass by contrast.

Kiku San sat in her usual place in the alcove by the green vase, looking out at the trees. The petals were beginning to drop, she noticed; some swirled to the ground in the evening breeze. Let them all fall, she thought; they were the signs of her dearly bought freedom.

The farmer's wife scoured a pot by the doorway. Miyoshi sat close to her, munching a bit of birch-bark. Rennoske tried to be still, but his eyes wandered from the waterfall's spray to the path to the rice fields. Beyond was Takenaka and action.

The farmer rose slowly and painfully, shuffled to a cupboard that stood on the floor, opened it, and drew out a paper lantern. This he rattled open, struck a spark from the tinder box, and lit the wax-berry candle inside. Then he hung the lantern from a hook on one of the bamboo rafters, went back to the cupboard, and brought out the wooden board and the chessmen.

"Come, son," he called, squatting down before it. "Let us see if thou can beat me at *shogi*—*hei?*"

Rennoske never looked, never moved, answering in a far-away voice:

"It grieves me that I cannot play tonight, O my father."

"Wherefore so?" snapped the farmer. "Is thy brain fogged? Art dreaming of turning bandit? Thou canst not play in good sooth! *Hei*, thou hulking boy! Hither, lest I cuff thee upon the ears!"

"Wherefore begin that which cannot be finished?" Rennoske questioned by way of reply. "When the moon casts no shadow on the pine tree must I be upon the green before Takenaka. Many men wait there for me."

"Dost thou hear him?" Miyoshi chortled. "Many men wait for him at Takenaka — ho-ho! They do not fly kites in the evening, lad. Get thee to bed, for I see thou art loose in thy mind again."

Rennoske rose and went to his corner of the room. The farmer wisely nodded his head; he thought his advice taken. His jaw dropped when he saw his foster-son before him again, wearing his long kimono.

"And now it is time," Miyoshi's astonished ears heard him say. "I must don my armor on the way, and must therefore start early. I would stay and help with the transplanting, but I fear that must wait as it shall in many fields hereabouts.

"Aye and farther — for our own seed sprouts now. Many gardens grow steel instead of flowers. To you, O my father! To you, O my mother! To thee, O Kiku San! *Saianara* — I salute you!"

And he bowed to the matting.

Miyoshi saw the fire in his eye; this was no joke, as he had thought. He licked his dry lips as he asked:

"Whither do you go, lad?"

"We make war upon the Matsuyama. An hundred wait at Takenaka. Messengers have traveled since noon to Boruku. There shall be a thousand odd by the morning of the second day hence."

"Who leads them?"

"Inari willing, I do, O my father."

Miyoshi the Farmer could do nothing but gurgle. Under his very eyes! Under his very nose! The boy who worked in the rice fields! The "hulking lad" who helped him with the charcoal! He a leader of a thousand men against the Matsuyama!

Oh, incredible thing in a most incredible world! Osaki the Sailor came not from the sea, his cracked-brained son to lead an army — *hei!* but the gods made a footstool of him and made game of his cunning! He was Japanese enough, however, to swallow his chagrin and rise, saying:

"My blessing go with thee, O my son. Victory shine on thine arms. Forget us not. Defeat over-

come thee, return to us and we will give shelter. *Saianara* — I salute you!"

Rennoske turned his head at a thump upon the matting. He looked toward the sound and saw Kiku lying prone upon the floor on her face. He saw no more, for he turned his face toward the path to the rice fields. He did not once look back; the royal blood of a fighting race took its toll. This was no time for pity, no time for love. With head erect he passed the boulder and was lost to sight to those in the *shoji* upon the tiny plateau.

He had not gone far along the moon-speckled path when a hiss and a rustle of leaves halted him.

"A snake's hiss in the grass is the password," he whispered. "Who art thou?"

"It is I — O Kina," came a cracked voice.

The old soldier shambled out, bearing a heavy bundle. Rennoske came toward him, and the two stood in the deep shadow of a maple.

"Thou hast on no leathern shirt, yet thy juban will do as well," O Kina began. "Take off thy kimono — nay, bear it with thee, for it is good to lie upon nights. Here is the breastplate," and he dived into the bag, returning with the cuirass in his gnarled old hands. "A bit rusty, mayhap, but still able to hold off spear thrusts. The chain armor for stopping the knife stabs goes beneath — wait — I will put it upon thee."

His trembling old fingers were busy with lacings, straps, and buckles, most of them moldy and soft from lack of use; but the steel shell fitted, for the frame of O Kina had shrunken since he last had it on.

Toe caps and instep rings, shin plates and chain armor for the calf of the leg, thigh guards and the jointed apron — the old soldier talking glibly the while. Horsemen were not to be feared — it was best to stand — the beasts feared the spears. Raise the arm when the sword swung for the head, if it were too late for the parry.

So babbled O Kina while the armor covered the frame of Rennoske. When at last he walked toward the path again, he gleamed and shone in the moonlight — a warlike sight for old O Kina's eyes.

"Give me the sword," he called.

O Kina handed the weapon to him and smiled again at the firm grip of the gauntleted fist. They walked the rest of the way in silence, O Kina in the rear, bearing the kimono.

Quite a different sight was the lawn before Takenaka that moonlight April night. Instead of running boys with kites, there was spread out upon it moving black things. Men these were, armed with spear and ax. They rested upon their arms in odd groups, talking softly of their chances of gathering forces as they went.

They had been told to make as little noise as

possible; but something they now saw made them forget their word. Out into the full glow of the moonlight, from between the trees, a man stepped out before them. On his head was a steel helmet, from top to toe he gleamed, and his long sword threw back the glint of the moonbeams.

For a summer and a winter they had listened to his words — he whose station in life was above theirs, they knew, had planned this with what seemed supernatural wisdom.

He it was told where the messages were to be sent and what these messages should be. He it was who bade them lash their knives to their spears. He had sent his wisdom through other mouthpieces far and wide about the countryside.

Working by day in the fields, he had spent his nights among them, till the little band grew and grew, and now the name of the Little Warrior was a by-word among the peasants. From the day of the Boy's Festival — here on this very lawn — they had begun to love him.

Now they saw him standing there in the armor, brave, noble, and the shout that rose to their lips would not down.

"*Banzai Ko Samurai!* Long live the Little Warrior!"

It echoed up the mountain and down the valley, waking the cool glens, vibrating among the green

hillocks. The women and children heard it and trembled in their rest.

Rennoske raised the sword in salutation and his voice rang out clarion-clear:

"Men of the Land of the Rising Sun, we stand ready to strike the blow. Long have we suffered under the grinding of the Matsuyama. Our land has been blighted, our cattle taken, our houses burned, and our men and women slain.

"It is enough that we should rise against them. Until they are brought beneath our heels, never shall I live in the land.

"If I lead, ye must follow. If I fall, ye must fall with me. Men of the Land of the Rising Sun — I am ready!"

"Long live the Little Warrior!" came the shout again. "We follow!"

And so over the lawn at Takenaka, past the huddled houses of the village, skirting the path by the granite boulder that rose black against the moonlight, through the black bogs and stagnant pools of the forest, marched Rennoske, hereditary *Daimyo* of the province, at the head of an hundred men.

Many times during the night was the serpent's hiss heard in the grass. Many times one, two, or three rudely armed men came out to join him. By midnight they came to the opening through the trees that showed the way to the white road to

Boruku. Here they rested, two hundred and twenty strong.

A little after sunrise they began to march again, along the sandy way, flanked by the waving, green cattails.

Out of a cloud of dust ahead of them a boy came running. Rennoske recognized him as the youngest son of the Tapper of Laquer Trees, who, true to his promise, had given his seven sons to the cause.

"How goes it at Boruku?" Rennoske asked.

"The news spreads quickly, O leader," replied the boy. "The cormorant fishers leave their birds in their baskets and come to join you. Upon the beach they gathered this morning, sixty in all. They should be upon us within the hour."

"And thy eldest brother? Hast seen aught of him?"

"Aye, O leader. We passed at sundown yester-e'en. To the Village of the Crooked Oaks he is bent, where dwell the candle-makers. He told me he had seen many, but there was one master of many coolies yet to be won over."

"Send that the coolies come to us, for they are long-muscled men and clever with the knife. Walk thou with us. Much running hath winded thee."

The day was perfect; the birds sang in the trees; the crickets chirped in the tall grass. Rennoske

caught the spirit of it all. Victory was surely his! Was not the whole countryside coming out to meet him? From Takenaka to here was less than ten miles, yet their force had been doubled. At Boruku sixty more were to enroll under his banner.

There was yet the winding road through the marshes and the uplands. If in ten miles so many had come, how great would his force be in the hundred that lay between him and the palace of his foe?

The sixty fishers were there at their word. By sunset the wax-workers came.

They rested for the second night in a grove of sweet-smelling pines on a slope above a curved beach, their army numbering now three hundred and seventy.

The road they took in the morning ran in and out along the beach. There were no villages, for the wind swept free over the dunes of sand, a chill wind even in summer, while winter saw it a blast. Yet here and there behind a sandy hummock, grown over with wiry grass, would be a round hovel of peat, the home of some fisherman.

Some of these showed no sign of habitation; but as the little army came within hailing distance the doorways of many would be blocked by a man. He would embrace his wife, shoulder a spear or club, and make his way across the sand toward the band. Then it would be:

"I seek the man they call 'Little Warrior,' who bids us rise and overthrow the oppressors — the Matsuyama."

"I am that man. Do you come of your own free will?"

"I do, O leader."

"Join the ranks, then — there is room for many."

So they would pass on.

At the crossroads where the way struck off sharply through the hills, Rennoske found waiting for him the second son of the Tapper of Laquer Trees. He had collected a band of fisherfolk and sailors from the shore of a long-jutting cape that ran some halfscore miles into the sea.

Forty-seven there were, bronzed men and well-built. They had a grievance of long standing, and waited but for a chance to strike back at the soldiers who had destroyed their nets when they refused to give a week's haul to the junk of the Matsuyama that prowled upon their peaceful shores.

On the third night from Takenaka, four hundred and ninety armed men slept on the outskirts of a village, upon the steep slope of a mountain, whose sides fell sheer to a wide, saucer-like valley. The Matsuyama palace and its grounds was at the other end, near the mountains that showed velvet-black in the starlight.

Two rivers fed this valley on their way to the in-

land sea. The Obigawa wound a snakelike course behind the palace grounds, while the nearer one, the Nakugawa, ran swift through a green and reeded plain, whither the host of Rennoske must come by sunset the following day.

During the night many came from village, from crag-nestled hamlet, and tea plantation the country round. With them came the other sons of the Tapper of Laquer Trees. By sunrise the army marched down the slope, numbering the full expected thousand.

When the sun sank rose-golden behind the peaks to west of them, the rebellious peasants found themselves on the green plain they had seen from the hills the night before. Facing them at a distance of about a quarter of a mile, the swift stream ran. To their left was a belt of dense forest, whose aisles were dark enough to bear out any weird tale. To the right stretched the plain, sweeping away to the mountains.

There the first sign of opposition had been seen, for clearly distinguishable in the afternoon sunlight shone a mass of light-reflecting armor. This they knew to be the Matsuyama army, yet its strength could not be ascertained, for the view was blocked by many rises of ground, reeds, and trees. Rennoske rested his men, for the attack, he felt sure, must be close at hand.

As he lay there in the sheen of the stars, his kimono over his armor, sleep would not come to him. All about lay the huddled figures of the sleeping men who had trusted and followed him. He had no scruples about bringing them. They had come willingly. He told himself that they would not regret their step.

Had he not been all winter training them? Were there not a thousand, and all fully, though rudely, armed? Defeat? The thought never came.

The Matsuyama would rush upon them, belittling their cause and their strength. Well would they stand their ground. Slowly the black armor would be beaten back. The news of victory would be spread by swift messengers. Then let the Black Boar tremble upon his throne!

The only thing that troubled him was a slight pain in the back of his head. He struggled against it and soon fell asleep.

He was awakened by a clatter and a shouting all about him. The first gray dawn had tipped the treetops. On all sides of him there was loud talking and confusion. The men were picking up their arms with a wild-eyed stupidity, holding them this way and that, running into each other, going hither and thither like sheep in a corral.

"They come, O leader," said the second son of the Tapper of Laquer Trees. "Their line can be

plainly seen by yonder tall grass ahead of us. Quite near I crawled. There must be two hundred with swords and bows and arrows. From head to toe, every man is armored. Truly a fearsome lot."

"Do they advance?" Rennoske asked in the confused state of a half-awakened brain.

"Nay," the young man answered. "They stand a solid mass of black and glistening steel."

"Where are the fishers?"

"To our left. They cry for food, O leader. A fear has come upon them."

"Food — they shall have plenty by noon, if they will but charge as I bid them yestere'en."

The boy was gone in the half-light. Rennoske picked up his sword and made to move toward the mountaineers who babbled and squealed ahead of him. Some one clutched at his kimono sleeve.

"There was a stirring in the woods behind us, O leader," said a man with white face. "I have lived here many years and have oft heard the snortings. There is a dragon which spouts fire in the forest. My grandsire saw him once and then lost his reason. We cannot fight here. The men from our village seek to go."

"*Hei* — children's tales!" Rennoske snapped. "Stand your ground and bid your legs cease their quivering. Away with you —"

The pain came in the back of his head again.

A shout went up from the peasants before him, followed by another. Rennoske looked for the cause. An arrow whistled through the air — another — still another — till the air was black with them. The peasants were drawn up in a ragged line that wavered as the arrows hit. Here and there a man fell.

He saw that they were upon a slope of ground that fell away toward the tall grass where the archers were hidden. He saw in an instant how senseless it would be to stand and be mowed down by the hail of arrows. The slope would give the men impetus for a charge. They might rush the archers off their feet.

"Hold hard to your weapons — points of spears outward," he cried.

"We hear," came a sullen roar.

"I give the word — forward! Men of Yamoto —"

"Little Warrior! Little Warrior!" shrieked a man, running frantically upon Rennoske. "The woods are full of the soldiers of the Matsuyama — the woods behind us!"

"How say you?" He saw the peasants had gone but a few paces. "Onward," he roared. "Charge! Men of Yamoto —"

"The Black Boar!" screamed another frightened peasant. "The army in the woods rides on winged steeds, led by the Black Boar himself!"

"The Black Boar!" repeated Rennoske in the voice of a man in a dream. The sword dropped from his nerveless fingers.

And now the true cause of the hesitancy of the peasants in attacking the line of steel was discovered in the half-light. They knew a swift-flowing stream was at their left as they turned to attack. Now they found another one, a mere creek, lay before them unseen until now, hidden by the tall grass!

With a yell the other body of the Matsuyama rushed from the woods and, heading to the right, made to cut off the peasants' retreat.

"What shall we do, O leader?" cried the son of the Tapper of Laquer Trees. "See, we are surrounded. We cannot move."

"The Black Boar!" said Rennoske in the same far-away voice, and he stared unseeing at the men about him.

"He said we should attack," said one. "Let us forward."

"Nay," answered the other. "There were orders for the men of Yamoto. We are here. What is to do?"

Their argument was interrupted by a horrible yell from the men nearest the waiting body of Matsuyama. The archers had increased their deadly hail and the peasants, unable to move forward, pressed

onward by those behind, dropped like the tall grass in which they stood.

In an instant they were in the terrible panic of full flight. Some plunged headlong into the rushing stream, to be picked off by the archers as they swam. Others, the madness of defeat boiling in their veins, ran into the second file of soldiers, to be cut down by the waiting swords.

Rennoske was in the midst of a screaming vortex of death-stricken peasants. The din of their cries, the clink of the swords, the thud of falling bodies as they fell drummed in his ears. They rushed upon him and bore him down. He fell heavily and lay senseless on the ground.

The old blow of the Black Boar's sword had triumphed again, even as the Black Boar's army had triumphed over the simple peasants who had trusted and followed him.

Rennoske came slowly to his senses. There was a sharp burning in his throat; he could scarcely breathe. Then he realized that he lay under a great weight. He placed both hands upon the ground and lifted himself slowly to his knees.

Something rolled off his back and fell with a thud upon the ground beside him. He looked at it in the dim light. It was the body of a dead man. There were others beside him. He

must have lain under this heap of the dead and so escaped.

He counted the bodies. There were seven of them. He looked at the faces. They were the sons of the Tapper of Laquer Trees.

Wearily he walked toward the forest, sword in hand. He sat down under a great oak, far from that field of disaster. The sinking sun lighted up a copse of white birches before him. It was a good time, he thought. There was no other way open to him but death.

He took off the shirt of mail and bared his bosom. He would join the spirits he had sent too soon from life, join them and tell them it had not been his fault. Perhaps in the other life he would know what caused his hateful malady. They might forgive him if he explained. The point of the sword was already against his flesh, the hilt in both his hands.

What was this that rang so clearly in his brain? — a voice! A voice he had heard in childhood — an old voice, soft and low. What did it say?

It bade him pause — "Pause, Little Warrior." It whispered that he would yet conquer the hated Matsuyama. "Have courage, O Little Warrior!" He took the sword and broke it across his knee.

Chapter XV

A Listening Ear Behind a Screen

THE face of the Baron Matsuyama was livid. He dug his nails into his palms while he listened to the story of the armored man before him. The man ceased speaking, and the pent-up torrent of his high excellency's feelings burst forth.

"Incompetent swine, why didst thou allow him to escape? He was but the one armored man in a mob of a thousand. 'We could not find him, high excellency,' thou whinest now. Wherefore not? Could he fly into the air like a bird? Could he burrow into the ground like a mole? Could not find him, indeed! Was he slain?"

"We found no such body, high excellency."

"Where didst thou look?"

"Everywhere in the tall grass, in every nook and corner of the forest. Fifty of my men spent the day till long past noon in the search. There was nothing but heaps of the dead upon all the ground and the weapons flung away of those that fled."

"So then — it is not my loss. This fellow will

rise again, mark my words, and thou and thy troop will have all over again the business of slaying his host of rebellious dogs. How many of ye fell?"

"But twenty, high excellency. The peasants were routed with frightful loss. Less than half of them escaped, and few of these with whole skins. Our arrows fell upon them like hail. They scattered to the four winds while we pursued them, cutting down the laggards with our swords."

"Aye, and then thou spoilst the business by letting their leader slip away. I had thought thou wert a better leader than that, O Mori."

The gaunt knight hung his head at the reproof. Then to justify himself he said:

"His Sublime Majesty the Black Boar was there. He, too, joined the search."

"Where is the prince?"

"Yonder in his resting palace you will find him."

Without deigning another word, the Baron Matsuyama stalked off along the gravel path past the palace that held the throne-room, crossed a green lawn ablaze with beds of hyacinths, and made for a smaller red-roofed building. The paper walls were up — with the exception of a space for the door. The baron passed the sentry and entered.

The Black Boar stood in the center of the room. Two Koreans were helping him on with a *juban* of raw silk and a soft kimono. The room smelled of

spiced perfumes and oils. On the heavy matting were scattered bearskins and leopards' hides; a spray of cherry blossoms stood in a tall vase; a *samisen* leaned against it.

The baron's son lowered his black brows at sight of his father. He drew down the corner of his mouth and grunted. His high excellency stood in the doorway, watching the servants at their task.

He waited for them to leave, waited for his son to flop heavily upon a bearskin and stretch out his short muscular limbs. Then his high excellency began in an icy voice:

"There has been fool's work done this day. Mori tells me you were in the search for this rebellious leader. What kind of craft was this to let him escape? Do you not know he will be upon us again? I know not who he is, but I have my fears. A fine bit of bungling have you done."

The Black Boar snarled and spat.

"It is easy for you to sit home here and tell me what I shall do. All night long must I march to meet these dogs, then hide me in a foul woods till dawn. Did not we, three hundred to a thousand, hew these swine to bits? We did not do so, and so, and so, you say. Go next time yourself and do better!"

"Have a care, boy," the baron growled.

"Inari be cursed, nay!" the Black Boar answered, thumping his fist upon the floor. "You would rule

the kingdom — rule then and be silent. Wallow in the mud of it! I shall do no more. Let it rot and old men's advice with it!"

The youth snarled and spat again.

"*Hei*, without there," he shouted. "Bring me a bowl of *sakkee!* Have it hot and of goodly measure."

Then he fell to picking at the rug on which he lay, mumbling and cursing to himself.

The baron stretched himself to his full height. He was boiling inside; his fingers itched for a grip at his insolent son's throat. There might have been a change in the dynasty in that moment of rage if some one had not plucked his high excellency's kimono sleeve and whispered, "I bear great news."

"What is it?" the baron snapped, looking down at the cringing servant.

"The dwarf —" the man whispered. "He speaks."

Like lightning was the change in the baron's demeanor. He caught the man by the shoulder and hustled him out into the sunlight.

"When was this?" he hissed.

"But an hour ago, high excellency. He knew me — and all about — him."

"Quickly — fetch my litter and the swiftest bearers — *isoge!*"

A tea-tasting party of silk-clad nobles and ladies

was disturbed by the patter of feet. They looked to see the Baron Matsuyama waving his arms and bidding his four litter bearers to go faster. The palanquin swayed as it plunged along the lawn, through the flower beds and between the camphor trees. They heard the cry of the carriers die away in the forest beyond.

"His high excellency is in a hurry," laughed a languid youth. Two dainty ladies tittered.

"Some one hath found hidden gold," said one.

"Or hidden charms," the youth went on with a guffaw. "Madame Golden Glow grows older. There are many pretty ladies about!"

The group all laughed and returned to their game.

Certainly His High Excellency the Baron Matsuyama was in a hurry. He sprang from the litter the instant it touched the ground and loped up the beaten path to his palace. Of solid logs was it built, for the baron eschewed *shoji* walls. They could be too easily pierced by knives or arrows. The baron flung open the door and sprang inside.

The room was oblong, two-score and more feet long. In one corner was built an alcove where a green lamp shone on a five-armed goddess. A heavy gong hung from the rafters before her. The walls were covered by many suits of armor, swords, spears, and other articles of warfare. Directly opposite the alcove stood a magnificent silk screen.

On a pile of skins that lay over the shining, black-lacquered floor sat the Ugly Dwarf, leering, yellow-fanged. The bandages that had swathed his head for so many months were in his hairy hand; he tossed them in the air, caught at them.

"Thou knowest who I am?" snapped the baron, falling quickly upon his knees before the deformed figure.

"Aye," the dwarf replied. "You are the Baron Matsuyama — I know you — I know Madame Kin-no-Yaku — I know them all. I could have told you that many moons ago; but it was my broken jaw and not my mind that would not let me speak before.

"See, high excellency — I talk quite well again, do I not?" The crazy-looking creature worked his jaw up and down like a hinge.

"Thou rememberest all?" the baron spoke quickly. "The place — the house — the country? Thou wert brought here by huntsmen who found thy apish figure in the forest. 'I have found Rennoske,' thou howlest. Then down upon thy face thou fallest, and here thou hast lain speechless for a year or more — thy ugly jaw bound in clay."

"Aye, aye," the dwarf squealed. "All of that I know — *hei!* but those were days of terror. Could I but see again the hand that hurled the stone — curse him — would I —"

"Enough of that!" interrupted the baron with a snarl. "Where is the Prince Rennoske?"

"The house stands upon a plateau," the dwarf chuckled, "a mile or less from Takenaka, upon the side of the road. One cannot mistake it, for before the *shoji* are three round wells of stone."

Then the dwarf went into further details, and the upshot of the matter was that his high excellency went quickly back in his litter to the palace grounds. He gathered together twenty of his best soldiers and bade them go with all speed to the house of one Miyoshi the Farmer and bring back the head of a youth of twenty-one whom they would find there.

The baron went to tell his son; but His Supreme Highness the *Daimyo* Kuroki Obuto lay in a drunken stupor, so the father was obliged to keep his news till the son should wake.

His high excellency had not long been gone from the dwarf ere a face appeared from behind the silken screen. It was the face of a woman, old and ugly; though the cheeks were pink like a baby's, the eyes bright like those of a girl of twenty, the hair black and glossy.

"I have jewels and gold," she whined, kneeling beside the dwarf. "I have golden chains and silver bracelets. I have sweet maidens at my call. All — all will I give to thee, if thou wilt do as I ask!"

"*Hei*, Madame Golden Glow," answered the dwarf. "Brave words. I have ever been at your command, slave and servant, to receive in reward but a cuff and a blow. Rise up — it is not meet that you should kneel to me. What has come over the world that things are upside down?"

The woman waved his words aside with impatience. She went on again with her whine.

"Listen, ugly one. I heard from behind that screen all that thou saidst to his high excellency. I would go myself; but the kingdom I know not—nor the way to Takenaka. Show me the way and all that I have promised and more shall be thine.

"Nay, look not so upon me. What shall the baron give thee — and I, returning with the prince's head, will again find favor in his eyes. Rich shalt thou be and dwell the rest of thy life in peace and comfort. Do as I ask. All my life long shall I bless thee. Do as I ask!"

The dwarf grinned up at her.

"You cannot go like this, madame," he said. "All the country would know and betray you."

"That I can arrange. This washes clean from my face. I will plan all. I will arrange all. Wilt thou do it?" she pleaded.

"What wilt thou give now?"

"See — this chain — of purest gold — these rings upon my fingers. Wilt thou show me the way?"

"Aye."

The dwarf took the jewels, hobbled outside, and buried them in a hole beneath a stone. While he was gone, Madame Golden Glow washed the paint clean from her face.

Chapter XVI

A Kimono of White on a Maiden

ON the morning of the dwarf's awakening Rennoske was half-way between the bloody field of Hachinohe and the fishing village of Boruku.

He had spent the night in one of the lonely sea-shore huts with a boy of sixteen and his mother. He had lain down on the mud floor and slept without a tremor in a house he had bereft of a father and two sons.

One might think that the mother, seeing there before her the cause of her widowhood, helpless in sleep, might revenge herself upon him. No such thought came to the woman. Instead, Rennoske was given the best of everything in the house, while the boys kept watch at the door.

She remembered through her grief the words of her lord that "the Little Warrior was great in the land — a helper of the afflicted." She respected his opinions and carried out the wishes she knew he would have had concerning her unbidden guest.

So in the morning she heated a tub of sea-water and Rennoske bathed. She sent him on his way with a bag of dried fish and some seaweed, and asked his blessing.

Near Boruku he was forced to take another bath, this time in cold water, kimono and all, for he saw a troop of horsemen trotting up the sands, returning from the village. What they saw was a black speck some two hundred yards from the shore, thought it a bird or a rock, and passed on. Being mounted and armored, the sea held no charms for them anyway.

Rennoske took no chances, however. By a half-mile swim he came to Boruku by way of the sandspit where he had first discovered his strange skill as a swordsman. There was a junk there, but it was not the Maya Maru, so he gave it no thought.

But the fishermen, who had come down to the spit to see the junk, were filled with consternation when they saw their late leader rise godlike out of the sea, dripping and smiling.

The fishermen of Boruku had heard of the Little Warrior before they had seen him. Tales of him had come through other mouths, the mouths of ignorant men like themselves. It was not strange, therefore, that these tales should be highly embellished as they passed from mouth to mouth.

The Little Warrior could slay twenty men with one stroke of his sword; he could swim the sea and

defeat the porpoise in a race; he spoke the words of the gods — in short, he was a demigod himself.

As for his malady — the peasants had their own version and explanation for that. He talked with the dead and found out from them what to do in the future. In the minds of the ignorant there is no hero like the hero of one's own making.

"Men of Boruku," he said, calmly facing them, "defeat hath come upon us. There are missing faces among you. Move warily, my brothers, the Black Boar will rule now with a rod of iron. Twice as hard will your way be. But fear not. I go where all men may find me.

"The flower but sprouted and was withered by the blast of winter. The root is there in the ground and will grow again and bloom in victory. We shall rise and overthrow the tyrant. When the call comes, ye will find me ready to lead or to serve."

Forgotten was the newly arrived junk, forgotten their unburied dead. They crowded about him. One took the wet kimono from Rennoske's shoulders, replacing it with his own. The Little Warrior was soon on his way along the white road, the shouts of "Long life!" ringing behind him.

Victory seemed nearer now. He had only one regret on his way home. He despised himself for having been weak enough to think of taking his own life. He would return home and wait. If he were

not welcome there — well, let that take care of itself when it came.

In the boglands through the woods he found a man sitting upon the ground with an arrow in his foot, unable to walk. He took out the festering point, bathed the wound in the stream, and helped the man to Takenaka.

There were greetings there from those that escaped. He spoke briefly and sincerely, then walked to a *shoji* in a shaded dell near by where — alone now — dwelt the Tapper of Laquer Trees.

The old man was seated on the ground under a maple. Rennoske bowed, the man did likewise, with deep reverence. They looked at each other in silence. There was no resentment in the man's clear eyes, though they must have read the news in Rennoske's.

"They told me naught, the sixty who returned, many with wounds," he said slowly. "They are all slain, then, O leader?"

"All slain," answered Rennoske. "It seems hard that I should return and tell this, but it comes to me that the Matsuyama will yet fall at my hands."

"Surely they will," the man resumed, a ring in his voice. "What was the need of your death? Your cause was just, your purpose right. The gods, no doubt, have spared you for another trial — which, I pray, will be soon. Did they die well?"

"Aye, reverend sir. It is to them I owe my life."

"That is well said and leaves me content. Eight sons my wife bore me. All of them the Matsuyama have slain because they were strong and resisted. When you come again, having nothing else, I shall give myself. *Saianara*, O leader!"

"With hearts as stanch as thine, the Matsuyama will not long hold us in subjection. *Saianara*, reverend sir!"

Rennoske bowed again and turned upon his heel. As he passed along the road he saw many signs of the havoc his warlike spirit had wrought. Wives were in the fields without their husbands. Oxen stood idle at the wagon sheds. Yet many must have escaped.

He saw the peasants on the steep slope of the brown and green hills. There would be always a wave of the hand, a bow to the earth. The simple devotion touched him and made him more than ever desire to lead them to the victory he felt sure must one day be his.

And now he was in sight of the zigzag path that led to the only home he had ever known. In the red light of the sunset he could plainly see the house. What was there so unfamiliar about it? Why were there so many moving figures by the stone wells?

So weary was his spirit and so heavy his steps that

it was nightfall before he reached the path, and toiling up, sent the pebbles clattering down. As he reached the summit where the by-path branched off, he saw that the *shoji* walls of paper were already in their grooves, and there was much light within. There were moving figures on the translucent screen. He walked slower still.

What was the unfamiliar thing, and where? He looked all about him, at the cherry trees, the garden, the one, two — there it was, by the third stone well. He could distinguish it plainly, although the light was faint, a great heaping of branches and twigs. He knew what it was — the funeral bonfire. Who was dead — Kiku?

A laugh from within the house made him creep closer softly. There could be no death within, then. He stood outside the paper and listened, feeling like a son coming home to rob his father. Then he heard a voice that rooted him to the spot.

"We were far out at sea when we discovered the leak, O my father, and it was then too late. The ship was full of water and sinking fast. We made ourselves a raft and launched it with all the provisions we could find.

"On this craft we drifted many days. At last we were picked up by a junk. God of the sea, our joy was short-lived! Our rescuers were our captors, pirates of China, O my father. They took

us to their own land, and there we were sold into slavery.

"For two years have I, once captain of mine own ship, been a sandal-fastening, old woman's litter-bearing dog, in the palace of a mandarin. But I swim well, O my father; they were fools to give me a pole upon the riverboats when there were so many sea-going craft about — *ho! ho!*"

Rennoske strode boldly to the door and slid it back with a rattle. He stepped into the house and stood there with folded arms across his chest looking straight into the eyes of the man in blue who squatted on the floor.

"Thou hast long ago invited me to thy wedding," he said. "I am here, Osaki!"

The seal-hunter, thinner, a few more lines about his eyes, sprang to his feet.

"The unknown *Samurai*," he whispered; but none heard him, for the crash of a falling screen made every head turn. Miyoshi and Osaki had a flash of something white, and Rennoske found the yielding body of Kiku folded in his arms.

"Thou art safe, Little Warrior," he heard her sob on his breast. "Thou art safe! I thought they had slain thee. The gods be thanked — thou art safe!"

In the ecstasy of that moment Rennoske forgot everything, forgot that the eyes of Kiku's father and the eyes of Kiku's betrothed were upon him.

"I am safe, gentlest flower," he whispered. "All horror, all pain, all misery is forgotten when thou clingest thus to me. Stay thus ever, gentlest flower."

Kiku sobbed and clung.

"How now, swearer of oaths!" boomed Osaki. "How now, raiser of rice? Is this how thou keepest a promise? Because I am gone two years instead of one, because I bring no pelts of the seal, so quickly dost thou forget who is the promised husband of thy daughter? Aye, that thou canst gaze with such doddering eyes upon that!"

And Osaki pointed a scornful finger at the two, who, oblivious to their surroundings, were still locked in each other's arms.

"Thou art wrong, Osaki," cringed Miyoshi. "Thou art wrong. Does not my daughter even now wear the white robe of mourning as a sign she is dead to us? Does not the bonfire of purification stand ready to be lighted outside my house, even as if she were borne from us a corpse?

"Do not thy father, and thy mother, and thy guests even now heat the *sakkee* for the nine times nine times at thy house? I have broken no oath, Osaki. I swear it by the spirits of mine ancestors!"

"Then yon fatherless, unknown dog has played me false!" snarled the seal-hunter. "He has stolen

the girl's heart behind my back. Traitor to me, to thee, and to the people that he is!"

Rennoske tore Kiku's arms from him and with a single catlike step stood facing Osaki.

"Take back those words, base-born sailor," he said in a low, threatening voice. "Take them back lest I thrust them down thy *sakkee*-drinking throat."

"Not a word," answered Osaki. "Not if you were the son of every demon that rides the typhoon. A traitor you are. I have said it!"

Like two brown bears they clinched. Kiku screamed; Miyoshi stood speechless, while his wife clung about his knees.

Round the room the two men wrestled. The vase in the alcove fell clattering to the floor, the house shook as they swung each other about, straw-shod feet scraping, kimono sleeves flying. First, the pale, oval face was thrust backward, then the brown.

Then slowly, slowly, the blue-clad figure bent backward from the waist. With a mighty twist it was sent reeling to the floor. Rennoske sprang at the sailor's throat and thrust his knee upon the heaving chest. Still as a statue he held him there, his own breath coming fast.

The seal-hunter was helpless, for he had fallen with his arms behind him, and they were held back by his own weight. Kiku was trembling violently;

Miyoshi and his wife stood speechless in open-eyed terror.

"Hunter of the Seal," came Rennoske's voice, steel-cold, "the weakling is sometimes strong, the imbecile sometimes brother to the tiger. There is nought between thee and death but my five fingers. Thou art on a troubled sea in a boat of rice paper, Osaki — so? Yet it is not thus I would win, O Kiku San, daughter of my father. For her honor, then, I spare thee. Rise, Hunter of the Seal!"

And Rennoske took his hands from the other's throat and his knee from his chest and rose himself with a smile.

It was some moments before the sailor could speak. He sat up, rolling his head from side to side. Then he got to his feet and faced Rennoske.

"Should we ever again come face to face, O unknown man," he said with smooth politeness; "should it so happen that my fingers were about your throat, I fear I should be honorably obliged to press hard — aye, to slay you."

Rennoske bowed low.

"I accept your challenge, O Osaki," he answered with equal suavity. "Yet, perhaps I will not interrupt an honorable ceremony of marriage. The nine cups of wine are ready at your house. The guests are assembled, the *samisen* plays. My father awaits the lighting of the funeral fire. The bride wears the

white of mourning. I stand not in your way. Why do you take her not?"

The veins in Osaki's neck swelled under the taunting words, yet he controlled himself and answered, smiling insolently:

"To take her now would be to take her as your gift, and gifts are not welcome by me at your hands. The daughter of Miyoshi may take off her kimono of white. There shall be no marriage between her and me until the stain is wiped from my name!"

"Gods of my ancestors!" cried Miyoshi. "Dost thou mean I am dishonored? Then shall death be my daughter's bridegroom."

"Dishonored you are not, O my father!" answered Rennoske proudly. "That I swear."

"Then what means Osaki?" questioned the farmer. "Why does he refuse my daughter's hand? What is *thy* word, pauper and foundling?"

"Softly," said Osaki to the elder man. "The unknown man is mine enemy; I would slay him if I could. Yet his word is sacred, and thou must believe, O Farmer of the Three Wells. To thee, to thy wife, to thee, unknown sir, and to thee, O Kiku San, until I return again, *Saianara!*"

And Osaki, bowing to all, took his broken fan from his sash, snapped it open, and walked slowly through the open door.

All thoughts of the encounter were wiped clear

from Rennoske's brain. Why should his foster-father believe him? Did Osaki know who he was, or merely that his word should be taken?

He remembered how the sailor had changed that day upon the Maya Maru when he had mentioned the two swords. Was he, then, really a *Samurai?* If so, whose son was he and how came he here? He stood wrapped in thoughts that baffled.

When at length he came to himself the inside walls were in place, Kiku and her mother were behind them. He was alone with his foster-father.

"It is best I go, O my father. I fear I am no longer welcome under your roof."

"Welcome thou art," answered Miyoshi.

After all, Osaki was gone, the boy was strong and willing, and doubtless the warlike ideas were out of his head now.

"There is no quarrel between us. I have taken thy word. Moreover, I swore to keep thee until thou wert sent for. My oath is as sacred as thine."

"I thank thee, O my father," Rennoske answered. "This is the only home I know. Those under its roof do I love. You are my father — I will obey."

With his brain reeling amid thoughts of swords, rebellion, *Samurai*, conjectures as to his parentage, Osaki's words, and the soft whisperings of Kiku, Rennoske slept again under the roof of the Farmer of the Three Wells.

Chapter XVII

Two Rice Plants Torn up by the Roots

RENNOSKE was awakened by the usual banging and scraping that accompanied the taking down of the outside *shoji* walls. He sprang up, went outside for his morning bath, and donned his gray cotton *shuban* and the *haragakke*, the short, coarse coat, the badge of peasantry.

He went about his old work of chopping down a tree with the same gaiety he had always had at the task. Yet, while he was about it, his brain was busy. A gigantic task lay before him.

He had worked in secret for a year to overthrow a dynasty. Like a pricked bubble, his plan was less than nothing. Yet, by Inari, the dynasty must be overthrown!

How was it to be done? He had less in the way of arms and men than before and no one to help him. The Matsuyama, having overcome one rebellion, would be on the lookout and, naturally, crush the beginning of another; aye, they might

even put a price upon his head and hunt him throughout the land. All this he granted.

But there was a paramount thought. The people were crushed — the people looked to him to lead them. Lead them he must, though his head roll for it.

How was it to be done — he knew not. But it would be done and he would do it, the Baron Matsuyama, the Black Boar, and all the armored hirelings against him notwithstanding. So much for the prince in him.

The birds sang, "Thou shalt do it"; the mountain torrent roared, "Thou shalt do it"; the tree crashed to the ground under a mighty blow from his ax, shrieking as it fell, "Thou shalt do it!"

He dragged it down the slope, a far different young man from the one who sat in the forest these three days back with a sword at his own breast.

They sat down to a meager breakfast — his foster-father and mother, Kiku, and himself. Everything was the same as it was before the rebellion or the coming of Osaki.

To say Miyoshi was pleased with the outcome of affairs would be putting it falsely. He had still a daughter in the house who should by now have been a wife. He had his foster-son back again, though different — a leader of an army, the conqueror of Osaki. There could be no more talk of cuffing

about the ears. The farmer, who had once scorned and laughed at the boy, now feared him with a superstitious fear. Like the rest of his clan, however, Miyoshi was a fatalist. The lad was here — the best should be made of it — *hei!* the gods abused him!

"It is time for the transplanting, son," he said after the meal. "Already are we more than a week behind."

"It shall be done, O my father," Rennoske replied, wondering at the old man's mild tone. Work was work, after all, and he must do it, if he would eat and live.

All morning long the four labored, ankle-deep, in the rice fields. They returned to the house for a frugal meal at noon; then again to the fields and work. Once Rennoske stood up straight, for the pain in his back was great from long bending. His finger-tips, too, were shriveled by long immersion in the water. Kiku stood beside him. Like a flash her position in this tangle came to him.

Farther than ever from him now she was — he knew that. Osaki was gone, stung by a taunt. He, in his excess of sudden jealousy, had flung the girl in the seal-hunter's face. Osaki had retaliated by refusing her and challenging him.

Could he now take what he had offered to his rival with scorn? Then, too, the sailor had the

whiphand over him. He had not refused the girl — he was still her betrothed. The oath he had not asked be taken back.

"There shall be no marriage between her and me *until* the stain is wiped from my name," the seal-hunter had said. It was clear the seal-hunter believed the marriage some time would take place. Thus Rennoske saw the thing in its true light. The victory last night had been his; the triumph today was Osaki's.

"Thine eyes are clearer than mine," said the farmer suddenly. "Who dost thou see about our house?"

Rennoske shaded his eyes and looked toward the cottage.

"There is an old woman I see plainly," he replied. "The other might be a boy by his stature, yet his shoulders are too broad, and his arms hang to his knees like an ape's. An odd creature, surely."

"I know of no such pair," said the farmer. "What do they seem to do?"

"They look about, O my father, as if in search of some one."

"*Hei!* Perhaps they would buy rice plants or have lost their way."

Miyoshi stepped out of the ditch and ambled through the grass.

"Come, woman," he called to his wife, "thy help may be needed."

They had no sooner rounded the boulder than Rennoske bent over to the silent, stooping Kiku San, and in the ardor of his youth his words came in a passionate stream:

"My gentlest flower, it is but just that thou shouldst know the joy that came to me when thou didst show to me where thy heart was. Long have I loved thee, and in silence, for I knew thou wert the promised bride of another.

"Honor closed my lips, Kiku San, and I thought thy grief was for Osaki, when it was but fear that I should be slain. I thank thee for thy love! It shall keep me company many a weary day. I know now that my love is returned."

She looked up at him smiling, yet there were tears in the smile. She must have divined by his manner more than his words what was in his mind. She answered sweetly:

"Why must you go, Little Warrior, and whither? Is it not pleasant here? It is not for me to ask; I am but a woman. I would not have you go."

"Yet go I must, soon or late, gentlest flower. Defeat came upon me in the field. I am a man, Kiku San. Shall the people rise and point fingers at me, crying, 'Coward'? Nay, till that defeat is turned to victory must I wander far. Wouldst have

a poltroon for a husband? By Inari, nay! Triumphant I return or never. This is my *Saianara!*"

"Then why do you leave me here to be the bride of Osaki, whom I hate?" questioned the trembling girl. He scowled at the name. She saw her words had struck, and followed her vantage:

"Why do you fear him? Twice have you vanquished him in fair fight. Man to man he is no match for you."

"Fear him? It is to meet him I go. Thou knowest full well he durst not touch me while I am yet under my father's roof."

"And you will think of me when afar, Little Warrior?"

"Think of thee, gentlest flower," he said, and there was tenderness in his voice. "When the sun shines golden on the rice fields; when the red moon of autumn turns the spray from the mountain torrent into a thousand tiny rubies; when the heron flies across the sea and the air is sweet with the salt and the seaweed; when the soft spring rain scatters pink the petals of the cherry blossoms; when the chrysanthemums nod red, yellow, and purple in the November breeze, then will I think of thee, O Kiku San."

She would have spoken a reply; she might have told him many things, many things she could have done for him, for there was nothing she could not

have done at that moment. But Kiku was unlearned and unlettered.

She could not tell her love as he could. But it was there, overwhelmingly there. She saw how hard the battle would be with him gone. He was a man. His sword, his strong arm might hew down barriers. He needed but to find Osaki, challenge and kill him or be killed. Either way there was action, strength, with a ring of chance about it, while she must fight the woman's silent battle.

Should Osaki return and say, "Woman, the bridal feast awaits thee," she must come. If her father bade her marry Osaki, this, that, or the other man, she knew she must obey or be driven out to starvation or a life of disgrace.

But he was still there before her, her Little Warrior, and like a thirsty soul she drank him in with her eyes. He, too, was silent. Her beauty came suddenly upon him, for she shone now in the glow of his love. Thus they stood, ankle-deep in the water, as if each looked a sublime thing, seen for the first time.

The girl turned quickly at the shound of a shrill voice. Rennoske turned, too. The old woman he had seen by the cottage was tottering along the path toward him with the aid of a crooked staff, while Miyoshi showed her the way. Rennoske looked at her puzzled, then Kiku saw his face change.

A look of horror came into his eyes, his jaw worked convulsively. She saw that he was not looking at the crone. What was there about the shambling thing that came behind her? Where had she seen it before? Then she remembered. It was but a while after the Boys' Festival, when she had told Rennoske of her attempt to sink the Maya Maru. It was the Ugly Dwarf Rennoske had rolled the stone down upon.

She recalled the imbecile fit that followed. Surely it was coming on again she thought, as she watched his trembling jaw.

The old woman was now within ten feet of them. She was dressed in a kimono of coarse, fawn-colored silk, with a sash of darker brown. It was the costume typical of a merchant's wife, or of a pilgrim to a Shinto shrine. Her hair was a streaked gray, her face covered with a network of wrinkles that criss-crossed each other. It was a face unadorned and ugly. Taken from its frame of silk and jeweled gewgaws, washed clean of its paint, it was the face of Madame Golden Glow, courtezan of the Matzu-yama.

"The thousand shades of our ancestors be praised!" she shrieked, looking straight at Rennoske. "It is he! It is he!" And with a yell she fell face downward at his feet.

"How now, Little Warrior," called the farmer,

coming up. "Why starest thou at the swooning body of thy mother? Is it possible that thou knowest her not?"

"My mother?" gasped Rennoske. "My mother, say you?"

"Surely," answered Miyoshi, "or so she says, and hath walked eighteen miles since yesterday, all the way from Takaguru, where a neighbor hath seen and recognized thee coming from the battlefield. Lift her up, unnatural son; lift her up!"

"And what may *that* be?"

Rennoske pointed at the figure of the dwarf, who squatted under a pine near by, one great hairy arm embracing his bow-legs, which were clad in long, white drawers, cross-garted with a black, silken rope, while with the other he fanned his hideous face with his *tycoon*.

"For myself I know not," resumed the farmer; "for so ugly a thing I have never seen before. Ask thou the woman. See, she revives."

The old crone had indeed raised her head, then her body, so that she knelt upon the ground looking up into Rennoske's face. With a wail she put out a wrinkled hand and touched his knee.

He sprang back quickly and stared down at her, his lip between trembling thumb and forefinger. The woman raised her hands to heaven, then crossing the skinny arms on her breast, she rocked to and fro.

"*E-e-e-ah!*" she wailed. "Mine own, my lost Kojuro knows me not. He knows me not! My boy knows me not! Knows not the face that looked upon him as he smiled, a babe in mine arms. Oh, wo!"

"Who is yon apelike thing, O woman?" Rennoske managed to blurt out. "Who is he, and why do I fear him?"

"Alas!" she cried, her rocking now ceased. "He knows not Kano, poor, misshaped Kano, his own blood-brother."

Rennoske laughed wildly.

"That my brother! How comes it, then, that he is crooked while I am straight? If he is my brother, we are as unlike as the pine and the apple tree."

"What has come over thy brain, my son," the woman went on, "that thou rememberest not the deed that made him what he is? 'Twas thy hand that misshaped him. Thou wert but twelve years old and he nineteen, yet thou hatest him because thy father loved him best.

"Can it be thou dost not recall the day thou hurlest him from a high cliff and broke his legs? Surely thou rememberest that, and the flight from us for fear of thy father's wrath? But come home, Kojuro, all is forgiven. Thy father soon dies — come home!"

"Threw me upon a jagged pine stump, breaking

my jaw," hissed the dwarf, "while a great stone fell with me and made this hump upon my crooked back. But I forgive thee, Kojuro — I forgive thee!"

Rennoske stamped his foot and shook his fist at the grinning, abortive creature.

"Nay," he cried, "thou art not my brother, ugly thing!"

"Is it so?" squealed the dwarf. "Then why dost thou fear me? Why didst thou hurl the stone down upon me these twelve moons back? Aye, hurled a stone upon me even from where thou now standest, cracking my poor skull that I lay like death. And when I came to myself, in the house of my mother, I was dumb from my broken jaw so that I could not tell where I had seen thee. Thou hatest me, as our mother says. The signs prove it!"

Rennoske stood puzzled. He turned to the woman.

"I tell thee thou art not my mother," he said with shaking voice. "Every drop of my blood cries out against it. Would I not know them if my brain were fettered by a thousand chains?" he asked, turning to Miyoshi. "Would I not know them, O my father? You know who brought me — speak!"

The farmer's brows were drawn together. He looked hard at his foster-son.

"It is true, O my son," he said solemnly, "that

thou wert given to me by an oldish man, who bore himself like a soldier, and had no look of these."

"What said he?" queried the woman sharply.

"In faith I recall not now."

"Think, honorable sir."

"So — I do remember his words: 'Keep him till they come for him,' and again: '*Saianara*, Little Warrior,' and so he died."

"Even so," said the dwarf. "It was Hara the Fisher. Remember, O my mother, he returned not to his wife and five little ones?"

"That is not the name," said Rennoske, with straightened shoulders. "The man was a soldier, didst thou not hear? Hara the Fisher, indeed! Thy lie-loom weaves poor cloth, O ape face."

Madame Kin-no-Yaku, plotter and power behind a throne, cast a swift, silencing glance at the dwarf.

"How canst thou be so stupid, Kano?" she snapped. "Hara was lost in the great typhoon. Did I not see his body washed upon the beach? Another carried thee away. One Tobiero, the tea-planter, e'en saw him with thee upon his back. Thou surely rememberest the name of —"

Madame Golden Glow lowered her head as if she watched the turn of a card on which her whole fortune was staked. Then with a reckless ring in her voice she spoke the word: "Hida!"

Rennoske gave a joyful cry.

"Hida — that was the name! We shall engrave it in golden letters upon the house shrine, O my father. Tell me more of him; tell me more of him, and I will bless thee."

In his anxiety he bent down and laid an impulsive hand on her shoulder. Her manner changed. She cooed pleasantly:

"As we go along, Kojuro, as we go along. Lift up thy mother — so! I will tell thee of Hida as we go along."

Rennoske looked about him in an odd panic. There stood his foster-father, silent and frowning. The dwarf, his *tycoon* on his head, leaned grinning against the tree. The old woman stood up, bearing her weight upon the crooked staff.

And there, a rice plant in either hand as she had pulled them up, her eyes staring, stood Kiku, ankle-deep in the water. Rennoske turned toward her. He strove to smile and hide the sadness that clutched icy at his heart.

"Farewell, gentlest flower," he said softly. "I knew I should go. Whence I know not, yet it is best I do. May the spirits of thine ancestors and mine watch over thee till we meet once more — be it soon or late, here or beyond."

Her voice came like that of a sleep-walker, a sibilant whisper:

"You go then, Little Warrior! The words you

spoke to me shall ring in my ears like the sweet tinkling of far-away temple bells at twilight. *Saianara!*"

She stood like a figure of wood, while the sun shone on the glossiness of her raven hair.

"Come then, strangers," said Miyoshi. "Thou wilt surely partake of an humble cup of tea at my hands while I bid farewell to my son, for a son he has indeed been to me." And he led the way along the path.

Madame Golden Glow and the dwarf followed, while Rennoske trailed behind with bowed head, not daring to turn his eyes again upon the rice fields, where the sun changed the waters into ribbons of orange.

Chapter XVIII

A Deserted Shoji upon the Marsh

E-E-E-AH! How my feet burn! How my back aches! And thou tellest me there are more of these hateful bogs of black mud with the sharp grass that sprouts up as from the head of an unshorn child! Gods of my ancestors — dost thou call this a bridge? Nay, I cannot — cannot cross it!

"Give me thy hand — so — carefully, carefully, Kojuro! 'Tis as slippery as a grape floating in honey. So — so — the gods be praised — I am across. *E-e-e-ah!* Here let us sit, Kojuro. I must rest. I shall surely die if I go a step farther. *E-e-e-ah!*"

All this from the ancient crone, moans and lamentings. It was at the same log bridge over the rushing torrent that had twice been so fateful to Rennoske.

He thought of the first time as he sat there silent upon a mossy stone; but the memory recalled Kiku again, raising the sadness in his heart to overflowing.

He reached out and pulled a switch from a hazel-bush, and with it cut viciously at the nodding butter-cups, as if they were the heads of the Matsuyama.

He was alone with the old woman, because of the fact that the dwarf had gone ahead to prepare for a lodging for the night, as the distance to his new home was too great for them to travel in a single day. This the old woman had told him, along with many other trivial things that interested him not at all.

The departure of the dwarf had not bothered him; he could spare his company surely. It was enough that he must listen to the complaining hag that sat beside him.

Not one word had been said about Hida, not one syllable of the news Rennoske longed to hear. He had questioned in vain. There was talk of the illness of his father, the badness of the tea crop, the dwarf's terrible struggle against death. Of the man that had brought him to the home of Miyoshi there was ever silence or a whining complaint.

"Is that the sun I see slanting through the maples?" said the woman at length. "Come, we must onward, Kojuro, if we would reach the house of Okubo ere nightfall. *E-e-e-ah!* More bogs — more filthy pools! Let me lean on thy shoulder, Kojuro — so — we go onward.

"Thou art a brave son and strong. Thy father should turn to health again at sight of thee. *E-e-e-ah!*

How my feet burn! How my back aches! It is not often I come so far; but it is worth the trouble to find thee, Kojuro, it is worth the trouble."

The woman whining, the man silent, the strange pair made their way slowly through and out of the woods to the white sandy road. Purple were the rushes, and cattails beside it, for the sun had sunk. The air was damp with the salt air; heat lightning flashed in a bank of sullen clouds to northward. Still they walked on, slowly, slowly, slowly.

"We are here at length," called out the woman suddenly. "Gods of my ancestors, it pleases me! See, Kano awaits us. This way, Kojuro."

The old crone turned sharply to the right and parted the tall green rushes. Rennoske, following, saw that the mud below his feet was covered by boards that zigzagged in and out, making a path. Even in the dim light he noticed that none of these boards matched each other, some being old, others new. They were clean and unsoiled by footmarks, as if freshly laid there. The woman ahead of him he could scarcely see, for the tall reeds that grew head-high closed over the crazy path. He wondered at the woman's words as he carefully picked his way. How had she seen the dwarf? He could see nothing but reeds, sullen sky, and black ooze.

A sharp turn and he came upon a round clearing in the wall of nodding green and cattails, in the

center of which stood the house, or rather what was left of it, for it was in a state of dilapidation. The platform stood upon three rotted tree trunks, sunk deep into the slime. Where should have been the fourth post, the boards sloped downward in a rickety confusion.

The roof was supported on four worm-eaten pillars, all of them at crazy angles to each other. The thatch was ragged and torn, filled with rotting birds' nests and the seaweed blown by the storms of years.

Upon the top step of a ramshackle tree sat the dwarf, still fanning himself with his *tycoon*, still leering, blue-gummed. Behind him stood another man. Broad of shoulder, deep of chest he was; his bloodshot eyes twinkled close to a flat nose, while a wicked mouth smiled in a square jaw.

"Welcome, O my mother," chuckled the dwarf, "and a welcome to thee, O Kojuro, my brother! Welcome to the humble house of Okubo. We await supper."

Okubo never extended a welcome himself, but spat into the mire. Rennoske followed the woman up the creaking steps and on into the house. Here an odd sight greeted him. Hanging from the four corners of the roof a ceiling cloth bellied inward. This was not unusual; it was the cleanliness of it that caught his eye, for it shone snow-white against the cobweb-covered rafters and dust-thick eaves.

In silence they sat down before their tables. Again Rennoske was struck by the strangeness of the dishes, for some were of new lacquerware, others old, scarred, and wrinkled, and some of chipped and cracked porcelain.

The meal was cold and tasteless, soup, bamboo sprouts, and a raw herring soaked in soy. Rennoske ate little, contenting himself with a morsel of fish and a mouthful of tepid tea.

He sat motionless while the woman ordered the man about. He could plainly see by the fellow's manner that Okubo was not Okubo at all, any more than it was his house, for he spat most unfamiliarly on the new-laid matting. Yet, after all, the woman might be his mother. Had she not known the blessed name that recalled distant and sweet memories?

She was tired and fretted after the long journey. Perhaps on the morrow she would tell him more. Supposing he was her son? Did she not speak of a tea plantation that his father owned? That might mean a home and an inheritance for him — and then?

The vista widened and the way lay clear. First there would be another rebellion, with his father's money to help him. A new ruler chosen and the Matsuyama overthrown, he would return, find Osaki, and challenge him. Once again at his

mercy, the seal-hunter could scarcely refuse to withdraw. He did not want to kill him, though if it came to that —

Honored by the people, hailed as their deliverer, returning home in triumph with many honors, a home to bring his bride to, surely with all this, Miyoshi could not fail to change his tune.

Thus sped his mind, building air-castles, painting pictures of himself and Kiku, rose-tinted days and full moonlit nights under the wistaria.

His dreams were interrupted by a banging and scraping that told him it was time for the *shoji* walls to be put up. He rose and watched the dwarf and the so-called Okubo slide them in. They fitted badly; the grooves were damp and splintery.

At length he found himself in the little paper-enclosed square that was to be his room for the night. Okubo had lighted his metal lantern with the many holes. He could see the spotted and streaked light as it moved about weirdly on the paper. He heard whispering, then the dwarf's voice:

"Here is thy bedding, O Kojuro!" A soft thump sounded on the floor at his feet. He picked up the wadded cloth and, calling his thanks, spread it out upon the floor.

"Thou art welcome," the hissing croak came back. "I wish thee a long sleep, Kojuro, my brother — a long sleep and a deep one."

He heard Okubo blow out the light. He was in darkness. He lay flat on his back for an hour or two, listening to the crickets making the *gacha-gacha*, the simple peasant's well-loved harmony.

A far-away owl hooted once — twice — thrice. He grew tired counting the melancholy notes. Now came the nightingale, its voice trembling over the waste. It stopped.

Another owl sounded nearer — then the far-away one again. The crickets chirped on, the deep bass of a frog adding to the lulling din.

But there was no sleep for Rennoske this night. Many had been the mental shocks of the day — his parting from Kiku, the old woman's startling news, the sight of the dwarf, the mention of that memory-rattling name. Now it was the strangeness of this that disturbed his thoughts, bringing back that odd, sickening whirling of his brain and the pain that went with it. Mentally he wrestled with the thing he feared — his thinking kept his mind clear.

From whence came that light? He sat bolt upright in a panic — then laughed at himself. It was a great jagged patch of glow upon the ceiling cloth. How silly! It was the moon, of course, shining through a ragged hole in the roof that the ceiling cloth covered. The light was obscured, then came again brighter than before. There must be

clouds flying before the face of the moon, he thought.

It came a third time, still brighter. Surely that was not there before! It shone through the ceiling and on down the side of the *shoji*. At first it seemed like the moving shadow of a spider, this thin line of black; but he knew then that it moved too straight for the insect. He must needs wait now until the light came again. It seemed an hour — at last it shone, bright, steady, silvery.

The thin black line was no moving shadow of a spider. It had reached the floor. Then, too, the line remained where it was; a shadow would have moved with the object. It was running horizontal now, at right angles with the first. Clearly, distinctly, he saw it in the soft lunar rays. It was the sharp point of a keen-edged knife!

A man was cutting through the thin paper wall. Why could Rennoske not creep from his couch, stand beside the square, and strangle the marauder as he crawled in?

It was this other horrible, stifling thing that crept through his muscles like ice, pressed down his chest like a load of lead, deadened his thoughts like the fumes of opium — this disease — this death-sleep — this cataleptic terror!

Suddenly from the other side of the room came a faint tearing sound; and there, less clearly defined

by the reflected light, but as swift and as certain, another thin black line moved on the paper; another knife point showed its sinister gleam!

Gods! To be killed like a rat in a trap as he lay defenseless upon his back! This was unfair. Wait — give him a fight for it!

The light was overshadowed again.

In those few hour-seeming moments, when the night noises sounded doubly loud and the rattle of the paper like thunder, he thought of every moment of his life — every moment before the great blank — the life on the rice farm, the rebellion, the rivalry for Kiku's hand.

Where now was the old voice so low and tender? He would so soon hear it forever in the spirit land. There was only a thin wall of paper between it and him. He wondered whether the knife blades would pain him or whether the leaden sensation in all his body would deaden their keen edges.

The moonlight shone again.

He looked to the left. The paper there was cut in the form of an L that was gradually becoming a square-bottomed U. He looked to the right — with his eyes only — for a stiffness in the back of his neck made it impossible for him to turn his head. No half-cut thing was there; but a clear square in the paper — black, grim, and yawning.

Something moved along the floor. It was a hand,

a long-nailed, twisted-knuckled hand. A broad wrist, then a hairy, muscular forearm followed it. The nails of the hand dug into the matting, the muscles of the forearm swelled — there was a scraping — a face showed in the black frame of the square.

Rennoske found himself picking out every feature. The slanting eyes with their saffron whites, the flat nose that spread over almost half the face, the long upper lip, the loose under lip that protruded over the shriveled chin, and between those yellow, sharp-pointed teeth the long blade of the knife shone in the pale glow from above.

He heard the sweep of the paper on the other side and knew by the sound that the other square was cut and another body was crawling toward him with another knife.

The face of the Ugly Dwarf fascinated him, for it came to him now that he had seen that face before — not in this life, but that other life beyond the veil of the past, when he was — oh, before he was the adopted son of Miyoshi the Farmer!

He tried to call. Words would not come. Surely this was too unfair. All he wanted to say, all he wished to do, was to ask this creature who sought his life his own name. Let him tell him who he was— then he could strike. But vain was the struggle— blackness—he knew nothing.

A bright light shone through the jagged hole in the roof when he awoke. He knew it must be the sun. It was morning and he was alive. Or perhaps this was but his spirit left here to haunt the scene of his death.

Fearing everything, he sat up slowly and looked. There above bellied the snow-white ceiling cloth against the cobweb-covered rafters and dust-thick eaves. There was the paper of the *shoji* walls — yes, there was the square cut in each.

He rose and looked along the floor. What was that huddled heap in the corner? He went slowly to it and looked closely. There could be no mistaking those long white drawers cross-garted with the black silken rope, no mistaking those broad shoulders and hairy, muscular arms that, with the fists tightly clenched, were drawn over the now sunken chest.

He stooped and turned the body of the dwarf upon its back. The yellow eyes stared horribly at the ceiling, the flat nose was flatter still, the loose-lipped mouth was wide open, and between the yellow teeth the tongue protruded black. About the heavy neck were the prints of five fingers. The creature had been strangled!

There was no halting here. He went to the *shoji* wall upon his right and strove to shove it out of its groove, for through that room lay the door. He tugged and pulled.

There was a snapping and rending of wood — the teak and paper thing fell inward, no longer held in place by the rotted groove that gave way under the pressure. A flood of sunlight followed him into the dim room.

There was no need for a second glance at the huddled thing in that dark corner. What was it now? Yesterday it had been an old woman who whined of her feet and her back. Yesterday it was she who, in fawn-colored kimono and crooked staff, called herself the mother of Rennoske. Yesterday it was Madame Golden Glow, plotter, courtezan of the Matsuyama, power behind a throne. Today —

The face was more than unadorned and ugly, more than washed clean of its paint and taken from its frame of silk and jeweled gewgaws.

For the streaked gray hair was disheveled, the eyes stared ceilingward, the mouth hung wide open. The skinny arms were drawn up and close hugged the bent knees. Plainly upon the wrinkled throat showed the telltale finger-marks!

With a roar of horror Rennoske ran pellmell into the outside wall of the house, throwing his whole weight upon it. It snapped and fell away from the worm-eaten groove, splashing into the mud with sickly thud. He jumped. A swarm of flies buzzed upward from the ooze. He would have stepped upon a something that stuck deep into the slime.

He saw that, too — the upturned, horrible face of the man they called Okubo. The signs were there, staring eyes, gaping mouth, blackened, protruding tongue!

Splashing in the mire, rattling on the boards, Rennoske fled. His arms thrust straight before him, his hands parting the rushes that closed with a rustling sweep behind him. Would he ever be out of this buzzing, green, ill-smelling ooze, this rotting, worm-eaten horror?

At last the road! It stretched out before him, white and green-flanked in the brilliant sunlight. On he ran, kicking up the dust that flew in a cloud and stuck to the sweat on his forehead. On and on, anywhere — anywhere — away from that scene of desolation and mysterious death!

Chapter XIX

A Heap of Blackened Ashes

IT seemed to him as if all the world were running that beautiful summer day. At least a dozen peasants had passed him, tearing along, wild-eyed, in the opposite direction.

He reached the bogs through the forest before he slackened his pace, and, being tired, sat upon a mossy stone to rest.

The more he thought of the last night's happenings, the more he was puzzled. Who had slain the dwarf, the woman, and the man, and—why? Why had the ugly creature sought to kill him? Why were the men running? Where was he to go?

It was all a jumble that he dismissed in contemplation of the sunlight through the trees, in giving ear to the birds that sang so sweetly, in smelling the perfume of the leaves as it mixed with the salt air of the sea.

He listened — feet were pattering over the leaves behind him. Still unnerved by his gruesome experience, he jumped up quickly. Was this another

to seek his life? He thought of flight and the log bridge that lay but a little way ahead of him. He could reach that, cross over, and fling it into the stream. To follow him would mean loss of time and would give him a fair start. Flight — whither?

He had already started; but suddenly, disgusted with a hare-and-hound existence, he stood resolute, listening to the pattering, waiting for whatever it portended. He saw the first of the men — fishers they were — carrying clubs, knives, and spears. They were about twenty in all. He folded his arms across his chest awaiting them. About a dozen feet from where he stood the leader halted and turned back to his fellows.

"We have found him!" he cried over his shoulder. "We search no more. We shall strike the blow!"

Still Rennoske stood, motionless, fearless now, with arms folded across his chest, waiting for them to come on and do what they would. Then it happened — the man dropped face downward among the leaves at his feet. In a moment the entire twenty squatted upon the ground, faces between palms.

The thing was so anticlimactic that Rennoske could but give forth a silly laugh like a schoolboy. It was like sweating in terror under a knife that hung by a thread and then find the blade but paper.

"Brothers all," he cried good-naturedly, "rise

and tell me why you have thus come upon me with shouts and ready weapons?"

"All hail the mighty one!" cried a kneeling peasant.

"May you live ten thousand years!" another.

"Long live the Little Warrior!" they all cried. "Long live the man who shall lead us to victory!"

Rennoske laughed again; the thing struck him as grotesque. As if in answer to his dreams, these men came to him swearing fealty and asking to be led to victory. There was the flavor of the supernatural about it.

"There is mystery here, men of Boruku," said he with contracted brows. "What shall twenty of us do? We are but a dried pea hurled against an avalanche."

"We care not," a sturdy fisher said. "We are bidden to follow you — that will we do."

At that he was more puzzled than ever.

"As ye were bidden? Strange talk, men of Boruku. No living soul knows my thought or cares what I need. Who bids ye join me? Answer, I beseech ye!"

"We asked his name," replied the first speaker, "but he bade us call him the Man with the Scar upon his Breast. This only did he say, except that more would find and follow you."

"What manner of man was he?"

"That, too, we cannot reveal, O leader, for he made us a secret sign that is known only to those who live by the sea."

"*Hei* — and you are to follow?"

"Wherever your steps lead, whether you will or no."

"I go to Takenaka and there bide me for a time. Follow, then."

Oh, puzzle upon puzzle in a day of puzzles! At night he wakes to find an assassin with knife in teeth creeping upon him. He is overcome by his malady. In the morning he finds that assailant and his accomplices strangled beside him. Now come these twenty swearing fealty to him, with strange words about "the Man with the Scar upon his Breast," who would send more.

He had an ambition to overthrow the Matsuyama. He had led a thousand against them and failed — now he led twenty. Sturdy, honest-faced souls that had tasted warfare with him — yet but twenty. Would the number swell again? Would the chance for victory come so soon and with so few?

The first thing that struck him as strange as his footsteps crackled over the heaps of dead leaves, and the footsteps of the twenty swished behind him, was a thin, blue haze.

He thought it came from the fires of charcoal-burners; but he was woodsman enough to know that

this would have drifted through the trees. What he saw came in heavy volumes, and wafted down from over the green tops. By the smell, too, there was more than charcoal burning.

Next he had a view, along the sun-filtered path ahead of him, of a frantic man with his wife and four small children. The man, running along with head down, carried one tot on his back, dragged another by one hand, while he held his wife with the other. She, in turn, carried another youngster, while pots and pans clattered from a string about her neck.

Straight for Rennoske and the twenty they came. The man neither saw nor heard them until he was about ten feet away. When he did, he uttered a howl of dismay, darted into the underbrush, hauling the whole yelping family after him. With the crash of leaves and the snapping of twigs the bedlam died away in the green distance.

"Who be these?" asked Rennoske of the nearest man. "They run from us as though we were enemies. I cannot fathom it."

"Nor I, O leader," the man replied gravely; "unless it be that the Black Boar runs rampant again."

"Let us hasten and — Look — there the smoke thickens."

Many times on the road through the bogs and

quagmire the scene, or ones similar, was repeated. Men and women and children, too, running in their direction, turned and ran from them at sight. Sparks now mingled with the smoke and fell upon the leaves at their feet.

They came now from the shelter of the trees and stood a little distance from the great granite rock on which stood the village of Takenaka. Rennoske's heart sank. His fears were realized. The smoke poured black now from the huddled huts. The village was aflame.

Through the smoke that was blown along the road Rennoske saw the fleeing figures. In the direction of his own home, up the mountain, into the forest, they were scurrying. One poor fellow, staggering down the road in their direction, turned and fled. He had gone but a few feet when he swayed and fell, face downward, in the dust. Rennoske ran quickly and raised him.

"Take the ram, then, wolves!" the man moaned. "The lambs all have ye slain. Take me — burn and slaughter — I will curse ye while ye do it!"

"We take no life, reverend sir — thee of all men."

The man turned and looked at him. Rennoske saw the smoke-blackened face of the Tapper of Laquer Trees.

"Inari be praised! You are safe, Little Warrior." The old man laughed hysterically as he scrambled

to his knees. "The sight of you is worth all the rest. You are safe, then — safe and unhurt?"

"As safe as ever, reverend sir. Why dost thou ask? What mean these fires and scampering men and women?"

"Well may you ask. Sit me here upon this stone, for I am weary and heart-sick — so — that is better now — *hei* — a moment to catch again my wind!"

Above, on the heights, the flames crackled; the smoke, blowing down, enveloped them. Up on the mountainside the cries of the fleeing peasants died away. The deep-breathing man upon the roadside stone, the ring of anxious faces, they only showed life amid the havoc. Nature's own sounds came doubly loud, as if to say: "Man alone makes war. Here is peace."

The Tapper of Laquer Trees, his eyes upon the ground, spoke.

"It was but yestere'en that Centaro the Wagoner came running into the house of Nogi the Weaver, crying out that a black tower of smoke rose straight in the air to northward."

"To northward?" Rennoske echoed with blanched cheeks.

"Aye — hear on, O leader! Jubika, son of the Sandalmaker, cried out the news to me as I sat by my *shoji*. I ran to the lawn, where were gathered

many more. It was as he reported; smoke and flames rose through the trees.

"Not long did we watch before Centaro cried out and ran from us. We could not fathom this at first, until we saw plainly that another column of smoke rose to the sky. All knew that it was Centaro's house.

"It grew dark apace, yet we stayed there upon the green. Horrible was the sight, Little Warrior. We watched the flames that rose ever nearer to us. As one red, licking tongue topped the trees, another behind it died away into a shower of sparks. Onward it came until we knew the last house upon the slope blazed. There was naught now between the devastators and us.

"Loud were the shouting, the cries, and the lamentations when, at midnight, the soldiers came from out the trees upon the lawn. The torches they bore shone upon their black armor. The butchers were upon us — twenty of them — the butchers of the hated Matsuyama.

"I stayed no longer, for I guessed what was in the wind. I went to mine own *shoji*, put up the walls, and barred myself in."

The man paused and looked about him; then he shook his head, as if the tale was too terrible to tell.

"All my life I have lived here, O leader. I have gone abroad at my work; but always I have returned

to Takenaka, to find peace and comfort. I pray to the gods that death come upon me before I must needs listen to the sounds of the night just passed. The cries of men, the shrieks of women, rent the air, and through it all came the crackling of the flames. Toward morning I heard a sobbing outside my door. I opened it and looked out. There upon the ground lay little Jubika, a great wound in his side. I brought him in. The soldiers had been to his house, he told me. They asked for some one.

"He, poor lad, becoming frightened, sought to run away, when a spear thrust laid him low. The heat of the flames from his burning house made him crawl through the grass, seeking he knew not what.

"'The soldiers — whom do they seek?' I asked of him.

"'They ask, first, if any know Miyoshi the Farmer,' he moaned. 'Then they cry: "Thou knowest him — where is his son?"' If the answer was glib or slow, it mattered not.

"The man was either beaten or stabbed, and the women driven out of doors. I learned later, to the shame of my soul, that some of our fairest daughters were dragged away by the swine.

"What more need be said, Little Warrior? I left my house and did what I could for the wounded, which was little. They burned it behind me out of sport, then returned whence they had come. Those

that escaped — I need not say what they have done. Look up, Little Warrior — like ants they climb the mountain."

The Tapper of Laquer Trees rose to his feet.

"See! Takenaka lies in ruins. All are fled but me. Gods, give me the strength — Inari, enter my brain and give me the cunning to avenge this shame!"

His old voice trembled, while he shook his clenched fists. Rennoske stood with thumb and forefinger holding his lip. He thought deeply. Then, as if to himself, they heard him say:

"They sought me — now it seems the time is ripe that I should seek them."

"You speak truly, O leader," the Tapper of Laquer Trees said quickly. "The hate that smolders in every breast now bursts forth with the flames of their homes. The time is ripe."

Still Rennoske thought in silence, while the awed peasants made a ring about him. Suddenly he turned to the Tapper of Laquer Trees.

"Thou canst write?"

"Well enough for the men of these parts to read."

"Thou hast brush, knife, and inkhorn?"

"The priest shall give them me."

"Good. Go now and fetch them. Then up the mountains where the men of Takenaka must pass. Go unto every tree that thou knowest. Cut away

the bark in a square that the white of the wood may show; then mark upon the square these words: "'Him they call "Little Warrior" waits by the mountain torrent under the curved rock until the moon is full. There all foes of the Matsuyama shall find him.'"

The man bowed in answer.

"Far and near I go, O leader. Far and near with thy words — aye, till I come to the camphor trees before the palace of the Black Boar. *Saianara* — I salute you!"

And the Tapper of Laquer Trees turned and walked toward the mountains.

"Forward, men of Boruku!" cried Rennoske.

If testimony were needed for the words of the Tapper of Laquer Trees, it was there in plenty for any who had eyes to see. The road, with its woods and pine-clad hills — the road he had come along but yesterday — presented quite a different aspect.

The steep incline to his right bore all the signs of the Matsuyama raid in their search for him. House after house was razed to the ground. An ox-cart lay overturned, the beasts dead in their yoke. Not a living thing was seen.

Yes — small black things stood out against the green and gray of the towering mountain. Thorough had been the work of the soldiers of the Matsuyama, Rennoske thought, thorough in everything but the

slaying of himself. He chuckled queerly at that — the hand of justice was not altogether stayed.

He passed the rice fields of his foster-father; the water in the ditches between the dikes of mud turned as ever by the sun into ribbons of orange. He walked quickly up the zigzag path, sending the stones flying in a shower.

Where the way branched off and the by-path led to Miyoshi's house he bade the men wait for him.

The sun had set and cast over all a faint pink glow. The cherry trees stood as he had last seen them, but slightly blackened by the smoke. The round stone wells were there, so was the garden where the chrysanthemums bloomed in November. As for the house — One post stood still upright, holding a corner of what had once been the thatched roof, now but a tangled and charred mass. The other two posts slanted inward over a heap of blackened ashes.

The body of Miyoshi he found on a little mound where the farmer often burned his charcoal. The wife lay face downward near the door.

He searched among the underbrush, poked long at the ruins, even throwing heavy stones down the three wells. After an hour he sat under the cherry trees, the Tapper of Laquer Trees' words booming in his ears:

"Some of our fairest daughters were dragged away by the swine."

He looked up at the moon, which could be seen faintly in a light-blue sky. It was a pale crescent. He walked back to where his men waited and gave them a command to turn down toward the rock that jutted out over the waterfall.

His face was calm, his eyes clear and bright. No sigh nor tear nor sob came from him. When the body of the Black Boar lay at his feet there would be time enough for that.

Chapter XX

The Knights of the Purple Lotus

THE rushing torrent under the curved rock. It was now no scene of childhood wanderings, but an armed camp. There was the ledge of granite above the boiling, tumbling waterfall; but instead of an awkward, shaven-headed boy, Rennoske stood upon it a full-grown man of twenty-one, steel-muscled and death-careless. Instead of a dainty, kimono-clad girl beside him, her left hand in his, there stood three rugged men.

The great rock itself, curved over like the palm of a gigantic hand, the thumb forming the ledge on which they stood, cast a black shadow on the white water that foamed out of the side of the mountain and fell sheer a hundred feet into the stream below. The moon was at the full.

Along the zigzag path up the mountainside many figures sat or lay, singly, in pairs, and odd groups. The light of the moon showed them, up and along the path, until it dwindled away between the two granite boulders.

They were there, too, these still and slightly moving figures. They were upon the by-path, upon the shelving plateau where once stood the house of Miyoshi the Farmer, under the cherry trees, in the trampled garden, about the three wells; yes, even along the way to the rice fields they lay in the rank, uncut grass.

The slope of the hill was black-dotted with them, and beside every reclining, sleeping, or sitting figure weapons silvery in the soft light.

For the message of the Tapper of Laquer Trees had been cut in the bark of many trees. The children of the Mikado had read; the children of the Mikado had suffered at the hands of the Matsuyama; the children of the Mikado had gone to the curved rock by the mountain torrent.

Then there were those who lived and took their living from the sea. No tree-cut messages had they seen; but they had heard a voice that bid them leave their life of toil, sharpen their knives and fasten them to long poles, — a voice that rang with earnestness, a hand that made a secret sign.

And they had come, seeking a man they called "Little Warrior." They had found him by the curved rock by the mountain torrent, found and sworn fealty to him.

"How are we provisioned?" asked the first of the rugged men upon the ledge—Takagi they called him.

A man of wealth he was, owning tea plantations with fifty coolies under him. But his tea plantations were idle, his coolies now bore ax and club, for a soldier of the Matsuyama had carried off his only daughter, and the Black Boar had answered his plea for justice with a shower of arrows from the palace gate. Takagi of the High Castle they called him, stout from a life of ease he was, with the light of doubt in his shifting eyes. Yet he had read the writing on the trees and had come to serve Rennoske, for his wrong was great.

"Each man bears a bag of millet. There is pulled and dried venison from the mountains, seventy sacks of bamboo sprouts and ninety of rice, not to count the forage we may gather on the way."

This from the second speaker, a broad-shouldered man of fifty. The Sorrowful Father they called him, and well, for the Matsuyama had lured from him his only son, who now drank deep in the court of the Black Boar, throwing away his heritage for a geisha's song and a robe of silk in the dreadful palace of the house of the Mountain of Pines. He had read the sign on the trees — for vengeance he had come to join the man they called "Little Warrior."

"How many do we number now?" asked Rennoske.

"Eleven hundred, six and seventy," answered the third man.

A dweller in the mountains was he — one Yukitaka. Older than the rest, some sixty-odd. No one knew from whence he came or why, for he dwelt high among the snowy peaks, among musty Chinese books. A deep thinker, a man of wisdom, he had seen the secret sign and heard the earnest voice, and so he came, for he loved the right.

"How are we to march, O leader?" he asked.

"I bethought me," Rennoske answered, "of the road through the mountains to the west. Here we avoid the great plains where our army would be spread out, an easy target for archers' arrows. By the narrow, walled-in road I would take, our enemy must needs meet us face to face. If our courage fail us not, we must, by force of numbers, drive them back."

"There is room for much speech upon that, O leader," Takagi spoke up. "The road to the east is filled with many villages, while that to the west through the mountains is poorly settled. By this we will gain little, while by the other will we pick up many men."

"I most honorably differ, reverend sir," replied Rennoske. "The east country I have been through before and drawn forth many faithful followers. Did not I meet defeat? Wherefore should we go that way? Again, most of those who are now with us have come from the east road, so we will gain

naught and are likely to lose a few when these pass their homes. The way to the palace is shorter to the west, the road harder. Will it not be more difficult for the armor-clad soldiers of the Matsuyama to make headway than for us who are lighter equipped? Are my words heard and thought upon?"

"Aye, O leader," said Yukitaka, "they are fraught with much wisdom, as becoming thy station. I think, brothers," he continued, turning to the other two, "the plans of our leader are well laid. The west road is the better way."

"The west road be it then," responded Takagi. "So-ho — whom have we here?"

A bare-legged peasant bent before them. Rennoske recognized in him one of the men he had appointed as an outpost.

"What news?" he demanded. "Why hast thou come so fast as to pant now like a breathed hare? Rise and tell us!"

"O leader," answered the man, puffing, "as I lay high upon the overhanging branch of a cedar, I saw the moonlight gleam upon breastplates. Long I looked and carefully. It is true, leader, a band of knights, about seventy I should fancy, march this way from the south. They come slowly — I came like the wind — yet they are still far off. 'Twill be dawn at least ere they reach us."

"From the south?" queried Rennoske strangely.

"Perhaps another body comes from the north," ventured Yukitaka. "They might seek to surround us. Had we not best awake the men and be ready?"

"Nay," Rennoske answered, "let the men sleep. They would not attack us here, we up the mountain and they at the foot. Should the courier from the north come, then will it be time enough, for after all, what should we fear from seventy? Let the men sleep. I myself will climb upon the mountain and watch."

In spite of the protests from the three that he, above all, needed sleep, Rennoske threaded his way among the huddled figures on the zigzag path and along the smaller path to the tiny plateau where once stood the house of Miyoshi the Farmer. He watched the road to the north—but not altogether. There were the three wells, the cherry trees, the garden where the chrysanthemums bloomed in November. How strange it all seemed now!

Where was the gentle voice that called "Little Warrior"? Where the feet that pattered over the matting? Where the eyes that looked so tenderly into his at his words, "Gentlest Flower"? Where was Kiku San?

But he must watch the road to the north — he must watch the road to the south.

The first streaks of the dawn revealed them, coming slowly down the south road. Rennoske

could even count them from where he stood. They marched in fours, seventeen of these groups, making sixty-eight knights, for knights they were, plainly enough. Even at that distance he could see every shining corselet, every jointed apron and pointed-cornered helmet. One of the first four carried a banner of silk; it lay against its pole, motionless in the still morning air.

Suddenly a breeze sprang up. The flag fluttered, half concealing its own folds, now rolled about the pole, then flew clear. Rennoske saw that which made him run madly down the slope, crying:

"Awake, brothers! Awake, awake and welcome!"

The men sat up, staring stupidly. He ran to where lay the three, their heads pillowed upon their arms.

"Rise, Yukitaka!" he cried, shaking them one by one. "Takagi, bestir thyself! Open thine eyes, Sorrowful Father, and look upon a sight that is rose-water to them — look at yonder banner!"

The three sprang up and in an instant were following his trembling finger. They saw the yellow banner, bearing no pine tree upon a mountaintop, the hated sign of the Matsuyama, but the purple lotus of their neighboring kingdom!

"Gods!" cried Yukitaka; "have these joined with the Matsuyama against us?"

"We are ruined then!" the Sorrowful Father cried.

"Nay, what need we fear of seventy — let us up and at them — to arms — to arms, comrades!"

"Hold, Yukitaka," thundered Rennoske; "look you!" The vanguard of the knights was near now. "The flagpole is draped with garlands. They come in peace, not in war. See — they halt — one comes toward us."

On the mountainside was now a Babel of many voices, angry and questioning. Rennoske and the three went quickly down the hill to meet the knight. The armored figure halted at sight of them, then, as they came near, drew his sword and laid it upon the ground.

"I seek the man they call Little Warrior," he said in a solemn voice. "Where may he be found?"

"I am that man," answered Rennoske, striding forward. "What would you of me?"

The man bowed low, then raised his hand.

"Our most sublime, most noble ruler, O Kotora, *Daimyo* of the house of the Purple Lotus, ruler of Katsu and Nokodate, the two states, hath sent me with these eight and sixty knights. They are to be at your command in this your war against the Matsuyama."

Rennoske stood speechless.

"Moreover," continued the soldier, "he sends a suit of armor of bronze and gold, a sword of sharpest steel, and begs you will wear it in his honor."

At the words two soldiers, one bearing the breastplate and trappings, the other the sword and helmet, came forth from the ranks and laid them upon the earth.

"Who hath done this?"

The fierce tone in which Rennoske's words were uttered startled the soldier and the three.

"Who hath done what?" asked the knight.

"This — this — this!" cried Rennoske, stamping his foot. "The Little Tiger, *Daimyo* of Katsu and Nokodate, gives not gifts of armor and men like rain from the skies. Who told him of me? Who told him I made war upon the Matsuyama?"

"I saw the man but in the darkness," the soldier answered, "after he had come from the secret council-chamber of the *Daimyo*. I asked his name, but he spake not truly, for he bade me call him 'the Man with the Scar upon his Breast.' Then he vanished into the night and I saw him no more."

Rennoske clutched wildly at the air. Then, collecting himself, he turned a strange face upon the knight.

"I most humbly accept the gift of Kotora, *Daimyo* of the house of the Purple Lotus, ruler of Katsu and Nokodate," he said in a far-away voice. "We march by the west road at sunrise."

The vermilion of that sunrise sent its slanting rays upon the mountainside. Rennoske had seen it shine

thus often and often, but never had it disclosed such a sight as this! The peaceful path to the rice fields now bristled with knife, club, and spear. Under the cherry trees men passed in twos and threes, trampling the blackened ashes where once stood the house of Miyoshi the Farmer. Down the path they swarmed, the zigzag path, where the tiny pebbles fell in a shower. Down the path, laughing, shouting, and singing. The word was given!

First came the twenty men of Boruku, shoulder to shoulder, five abreast, with white bands about their heads. Next marched the Knights of the Purple Lotus, their swords, breastplates, and helmets gleaming. In their wake followed Takagi and his fifty coolies, armed with the ax and the long knife.

A body of sturdy mountaineers were next in line, for weapons their long shepherds' crooks with keen knives lashed to them, the Sorrowful Father at their head. Bands of fishers and farmers came in their turn, all armed rudely, yet with something shining in their faces that showed deathless determination. Yukitaka led them.

Rennoske turned for an instant and looked toward the mountain. The sunlight blazed upon its green and gray.

"*Saianara*, O mountain," he murmured. "Thy son goes forth. Let my feet be as swift as thy

stream. Let me stand firm as thy rocks. Like thy avalanche, let me sweep away my foe. For the land of my birth, for the poor oppressed who trust and follow me, for thee, O Kiku San, wherever thou art, I go!"

He walked to the head of a band of broadax-armed woodmen, who, brown-legged and brown-clad, waited to bring up the rear of the army which tramped ahead. His fingers closed affectionately about his sword-hilt. He raised the weapon on high.

"Forward!" he cried.

And so along the road past the towering mountain, along the bank of the rushing stream, by the trees of the forest where the birds sang they marched, the army of the man they called "Little Warrior." Woodmen, fishermen, sailors, tea-pickers, coolies, and mountaineers, shoulder to shoulder, under the one banner, with the same world-old desire of liberty.

Well had the Tapper of Laquer Trees written. Well had spoken the Man with the Scar upon his Breast. Onward the army of Rennoske moved, to regain a throne he did not know was his.

Onward they marched — eleven hundred and seventy-six of them.

Chapter XXI

The Shadow of a Pine Tree

"HOW numbers our host now, O Takagi?" Rennoske asked the question, standing in the shade of a fantastic fir that grew straight from two black rocks at the head of a narrow ravine.

"Two thousand and twenty, O leader," answered the tea-planter. "This counting the eighteen slain in the engagement with the Matsuyama horsemen that fell upon our flank yestere'en."

"We have gained, then, seven hundred four and ninety even in this rude country and lost but eighteen," replied Rennoske. "What of the horsemen? I saw not the fight, having stayed behind with my woodmen in the Village of the Two Crags."

"The news is good, O leader," Takagi responded. "Ten of the men were slain, while some ten more fled wounded upon the horses of the others, so we have sixteen of the beasts living, with twice as many captured swords, helmets, and lances."

"It is well. Which way fled they — through the pass?"

"Nay, over the crest of the hills to our right. The shepherd we questioned this morning tells us there is but room for two abreast in the center of the pass. The way is stony and steep and will not warrant the passing of a pony."

"So," replied Rennoske, his lip between thumb and forefinger. "See that the men are well fed. We go upon a long, fast march at dawn. The mountain path, as thou already knowest, leads to the great plain behind the palace. Coming out suddenly upon it, as we should ere noon, it is but another two days' march to the home of our enemies. From the poor opposition we have met and the report of our spies, it is easily seen the Matsuyama expect us by the east road and have drawn up their forces there to meet us."

"Yet methinks, O leader," said the Sorrowful Father, who had come up, "that the wily baron will turn again to the plain, as we come from yonder mountain pass. He will have ample time."

"Time, yes," answered Rennoske. "But there is a river between him and us. They cannot cross it in time to cut us in two ere we surround the palace grounds still further westward."

With a smile Rennoske strode toward his woodmen, who were making their camp in a ragged grove

of firs, in the shadow of the cliff that towered above them. The Sorrowful Father and Takagi exchanged glances.

"'Tis a wise head he hath on such young shoulders," said the former. "His parentage must be high, or he comes from the gods themselves, for in the fifty years of my life such keen powers of reason I have not seen."

"Aye," answered Takagi significantly, "but what the gods give they take away."

"What mean you, Takagi?" asked the Sorrowful Father. "It is not good to speak so. Dost thou mean defeat will follow?"

"Softly," Takagi replied. "I mean not that. The mind of the Little Warrior is great, greater than any I have seen; but though his intellect shines with the light of noonday, it fades anon into night. He hath a strange sickness that comes upon him wherein he stares at naught and knows naught.

"For a moon have I been in his company, but I have not seen him so. Some of those who were with him before saw him so upon the bloody field of Hachinohe. They, in their simple hearts, declare he sees and talks with a dead man who watches o'er him and gives him knowledge supernatural that he uses when right again. I cannot tell these things — they are beyond me. Yet I hope he acts not so upon the day of battle."

"And I," answered the Sorrowful Father, "for then shall it be in our hands. Shall we fail him, O Takagi?"

"We have gone too far," the other smilingly replied.

He put a finger on his lips, for the voice of Rennoske was borne to their ears. They looked up to see him, clanking in his armor, walking with old Yukitaka toward them.

"The spirit spoke of victory," they heard him say. "All shall be well."

With a still deeper bow of obeisance, they welcomed him under the now black shadow of the jutting fir tree.

"Look you, O my brother-in-arms," he cried ecstatically. "Is this not a sight to surpass dancing geishas under the wistaria?"

With a sweep of his mail-clad arm he took in the V-shaped space between the mountains. The heights rose clear, the precipitous slopes in purple shadow, except where the last rays of the setting sun made a golden triangle near the top, as the light filtered through the two higher peaks, above and behind them.

Many streaks of thin, blue smoke rose upward from many camp-fires, the reddening embers casting a soft glow on bronzed, moving legs, on the black, gray, blue, and brown of the *hara-gakkes* of the

squatting ones, on the piles of bristling spears, the heaps of shining axes.

And the sound of it! The clatter of pots and pans, the sizzling of meat roasting on the coals. The laughter, the good-natured jibes, the full-mouthed, smothered guffaws. All was a happy, grinning, clattering, crackling, chattering jumble of sound and color!

Something stirred within the soul of Rennoske as he watched. What could he do to stir the spirit of these men whom he had seen ever peaceful in their toy houses with the toy gardens at the back?

The fishers, with their cormorants diving and squawking in the torchlit water. The woodmen with the ringing sound of their axes in the forest while their straw-sandaled feet crushed the sweet perfume from the carpet of pine needles below them. The shepherds, who dwelt the long day with their flocks upon the mountainsides, while they piped quaint tunes on flutes of reeds. The farmers, whose fingers pulled the green stalks of the rice plants out of the cool water. The sailors, the charcoal-burners — men of the sea and dwellers close to the earth, kin to it.

"Men of the Land of the Rising Sun!" his voice rang out, echoing from rock to rock.

The peasants stopped their chatter.

"Look ye upon yonder crag! What do ye see? A single pine-tree upon a peak. Look at my feet. It casts its shadow there. Look upon yourselves. Its spreading branches cast a shadow upon ye all. Of what is it the symbol?"

A snarling roar came back from two thousand throats: "The Matsuyama!"

"Shall it cast its shadow upon us?"

"Down with it!" two thousand voices thundered.

There was a swift rush, like horses into a fire, a running into danger, that was terrible. The crag, or sort of peak it was, rose straight up to a height of some three hundred feet.

The sides of it were little better than perpendicular, with a spiral path, probably made there by goats in their spring search for tender green things. In shape the whole mass was a rugged and ridged cone, with the offending tree on its top, like a feather on the top of a sugar-loaf hat.

The men of Boruku were the first to come upon the path and made to climb it at a run. But the mountaineers caught them by the ankles and held them fast, while some of their fellows climbed up the treacherous sides, hand over hand, like sailors up a rope.

A great shout went up from the men of Boruku. One of their number had wormed himself away from the good-natured grasp and now, like a brown

bear, partly on hands and partly on feet, went scurrying upward.

"Luru! Luru!" shrieked the woodmen.

An ax in his sash, a broad-shouldered, long-armed fellow of their clan had essayed to climb the north side of the slope, where the way was steepest. He reached up, caught hold of a jutting stone in his great, pawlike hand and, like an acrobat on a horizontal bar, drew his body after him.

Never pausing, he thrust up another arm, seized another rock, and up he went. In the space of a few minutes he had beaten all in the dizzy race.

"Crawl! Crawl! Bide by the path!" shouted the ten men of Boruku to the other ten that were now half-way up the slope.

"Dig feet into the earth!" roared the mountaineers. "The earth yields."

"Follow Luru! We do what he does!" came in shrill tones from the woodmen. Soon the whole north side was black with them, climbing up like great apes.

Rennoske and the three stood spellbound at the daring sight. Had the topmost woodman fallen, he would have wiped the rugged sides of the cone clean of the clinging figures, so steep was the ascent.

"We gain the top!" cried the men of Boruku.

"We gain the top!" echoed the woodmen and the mountaineers.

The fishermen had indeed come upon the tree at its dizzy height first, but they could do nothing but pull frantically at its branches. They and the mountaineers, seeing how useless their efforts, waited for the woodmen, who soon clambered up.

Now the tree was lost, surrounded by some fifty men, where there was room for no more than forty. But the steady *chop, chop* of the axes rang out swift and steady.

The snarl of hate was borne down on the evening breeze to be answered by snarl of hate from those below.

Crash, crash, crash sounded the axes of the woodmen.

The treetop trembled. It swayed while the crowd parted to let it go. With a shriek of twisted and rent wood it swayed and writhed, then, thrust over by many hands, plunged down, down, turning over and over in its whirling descent, and with a thud fell into the blackness of the ravine below!

"*Hei-ei-ei!*" What a shout! It echoed and re-echoed among the rocks, rising up and up. Rennoske caught the spirit. He drew his sword and waved it high.

"Thus shall it be with the Matsuyama!" he cried.

"Thus shall it be with the Matsuyama!" they

repeated. "Long live Little Warrior! Long live our prince!"

Rennoske shivered at the words, and with bowed head he turned and walked toward where the three were standing under the jutting fir tree, while the shouts rang ever behind him.

"A good omen, O leader," remarked Yukitaka. "The pine tree no longer shadows us."

"A good trick, too," Takagi chimed in. "This sets their blood at boiling-point. Would that we could meet the host of the Matsuyama on the morrow."

"What meanest thou by a trick?" asked Rennoske oddly. "Dost thou think I fed their minds with this?"

"With what, O leader?" answered Takagi, amazed.

"Thou heardst the name they gave me?"

"What name?"

Takagi was puzzled, Yukitaka caught the Sorrowful Father by the arm, unnerved by the young man's fierce manner.

"Didst thou not hear?" Rennoske went on. "They called me their prince."

"And what of that, O leader?" replied the tea-planter. "What is there in that speech so to unman you? Their prince you are, and ours."

"I will not have it so," the young man cried.

"Is it for this I brought these men from their homes? Thou knowest it is not so, O Takagi. To relieve them from oppression; to put a curb upon the reign of the Black Boar; to be their prince? Nay, it no more occurred to me than to think to fly over yonder mountain. Prince — I? The son of Miyoshi the Farmer? Thou speakest wildly, O Takagi!"

Takagi, encouraged by the glances of the other two, spoke boldly on:

"Not wildly. It is you who tend to wildness in saying we are but to curb the Matsuyama. As well might we strive to dam the mountain torrent with shoots of young bamboo!

"Who curbs the rushing of the black boar as he rushes red-tusked among the flying fawns? Curb him? We had best slay him, and then he forages no more. You the prince? — and wherefore not? Who more capable to govern? Who more wise, more beloved?"

Rennoske paused. The three saw it was with an effort that he spoke. His chest rose and fell, his eyes were wet as he answered slowly:

"To you, the companions of my heart, I say — and by no other living men would the words be heard — I say I am not fit to rule."

"Not fit?" the three echoed.

"Nay — you forget the mark upon my brain — you forget my sickness. The prince? Aye — and

'Prince Imbecile' they shall call me." He stopped, looking from one to the other. "Not I! Better Yukitaka here for wisdom, Takagi for courage, or the Sorrowful Father for justice. Not I, of all men!"

"Nay, not I," cried Takagi quickly.

"Let the young blood rule," said the Sorrowful Father after him.

But Yukitaka caught their eye. The light was faint, the other two could hardly see him; but they saw the long-nailed, bony finger he laid upon his lips and the sly twinkle in his narrow eyes.

Rennoske stood there for many moments, unconscious of everything but the turmoil within him. Then he found himself watching a tiny spot of light that swung in semicircles toward him. He saw, as it came nearer, that it was a man bearing aloft a torch, and behind him another man stalked.

The second man spoke to the torch-bearer, then stopped, while the man with the light came on. Rennoske recognized him as one of his woodmen as he came into his presence. The man bowed low.

"There comes one to crave an audience with you, O leader," he said. "There is that in his eyes that made me think he should see you."

"What does he call himself?" asked Rennoske, still in a dream of a future hope.

"He gave me no name," the man replied, "but

bade me say to you that he was — the Man with the Scar upon his Breast."

"Takagi, Yukitaka, Sorrowful Father!" cried Rennoske in a sudden frenzy. "He has come — he who placed me where I am. Stand near, I pray, lest the sight of him unnerve me."

Rennoske watched the torch dwindle away,—saw it pause, whirl, and then grow brighter and brighter on its way back again. He watched it as if it were a floating lamp upon the sea of uncertainty. Now it was near him; but the torch-bearer came before, the other man stalking in his shadow.

The torch-bearer came on. He stood at the side of Rennoske. The light sputtered as the man came into the circle of its brightness. The newcomer spoke as he came up, distinct, heavy, and of great volume was his voice.

"I am the Man with the Scar upon his Breast."

The light of the torch shone upon the face of Osaki, the seal-hunter, suitor of Kiku San!

Chapter XXII

The Man with the Scar

I GIVE thee greeting, O Little Warrior," said the seal-hunter with the suavest tone and most profound bow.

"Thou — thou — Osaki?" cried Rennoske in a choking voice. "Forbear! Why comest thou in another's name with thy challenge? Beware — I stand with thousands at my back! One little word and thou wouldst be in as many pieces as there are leaves upon the maple. It is now no time for private brawling, Osaki."

"For private brawling I come not, O leader," the seal-hunter answered calmly. "Moreover, men no longer call me Osaki. I am the Man with the Scar upon his Breast."

"To that name I owe many things," responded Rennoske, regaining his composure. "But between the man they call Little Warrior and the man they have called Osaki, hunter of the seal, there is bad blood and a threat of death. How can I, then, bow before one and hold ill-feeling toward the other? Thou speakest in riddles."

"The riddle is solved in Osaki's death. I am come from the ashes of myself. Osaki's challenge fades with the cherry blossoms of spring. His words are blown hither and thither like their pink petals."

"And canst thou prove thy speech?" Rennoske asked, thinking the seal-hunter's tame withdrawal unlike the former fiery spirit of its owner.

"Aye," Osaki answered firmly. "Call the twenty men of Boruku. Call the captain of the eight and sixty Knights of the Purple Lotus. Or easier — Yukitaka — hast thou seen this face before?"

The old scholar took the torch from where it had been stuck into the ground, walked over, and held it before the seal-hunter's face. He peered long and hard into the frank eyes. Then the torch was lowered. He turned to Rennoske.

"It is even he, O leader," he said slowly. "It is he who came to me in my mountain cave and told me a wondrous tale of thee. He is the bearer of the secret signal — the one who called himself the Man with the Scar upon his Breast."

Osaki smiled his old, insolent smile.

"Do you believe now, Little Warrior?" he said, slowly fanning himself.

"The word of Yukitaka is sacred," Rennoske replied. "Yet the riddle is not solved."

"I crave your patience. Let my deeds stand only upon their completion. Let me say that it is not

for love I do them — but for a greater reason. When I have done more, then shall I speak."

"But why thy new name, O Hunter of the Seal?"

"Truly it is simple. I wore about my neck a chain on which was a rare foreign jewel which hung upon my breast. When I lay on my back upon the matting, your knee upon my chest, the sharp edge of this stone sank deep into my flesh. Thus do I take my name from the scar of it."

Rennoske knew, in the light of the torch that then suddenly blazed up and shone in Osaki's eyes, that the scar was deeper than he said. What was behind it all?

"What deeds are yet to do, my enemy — and friend?" he asked aloud.

Osaki fanned himself slowly a moment before replying.

"Many, O Little Warrior. Let Yukitaka and these others gather about me so that none but us may hear. So! Know, then, that I would save the army from an ambush!"

"Ambush!" whispered Rennoske and the three together.

"Aye," went on the seal-hunter. The lines of anxiety on his face showed deeply in the light of the torch upon the ground.

"Ye think the soldiers of the Matsuyama lie upon the east bank of the Obigawa. Many do, in

truth, as your spies have told. But the eyes of the baron are many; they know you mean to enter yonder pass. Thither have his soldiers marched.

"They now lie hidden behind great rocks and boulders on both sides of the ravine. It is their aim to let the men of Boruku, the Knights of the Purple Lotus, the farmers, and the fishers, pass through, then to fall upon the woodmen, who are less experienced and poorly armed.

"They, hemmed in, will be slaughtered and the leader of you all slain. Then will they turn upon the others and the armored knights, crying out that the Little Warrior is dead, demoralizing them and driving the armored men back and separating them from the main body. It is you alone they seek, Little Warrior. No matter how you enter, they will lie in wait till you appear. Then will they strike!"

"Devilish!" cried Takagi.

"O fiend of the Mountain of Pines!" said the Sorrowful Father.

"Like the fox that he is," chimed in Yukitaka.

Yet, through it all, Rennoske heard a single sentence boom in his ears, a single sentence spoken by this same voice: "Should it ever happen that my fingers were about your throat, I fear I should be honorably obliged to press quite hard — aye — even to slay you."

It was the voice of this same man Osaki upon the night he was to wed Kiku San. Here then was a fine opportunity for his revenge!

Rennoske's voice came icy cold to the ears of Osaki and the three:

"How know we that thou speakest the truth, Osaki? How know we that the army of the Matsuyama are not even now ahead and behind us? Should we take the pass, might we not find ourselves surrounded by our enemy on all sides? Failing to enter the pass, might we not give them time to gather their forces upon the plain and so march against us?"

Again came Osaki's insolent smile.

"I see you still mistrust me," he answered in his suave voice. "I see you forget not that I once threatened you with death, though I have withdrawn my word. It is well so. Listen, then, to my plan.

"Let the twenty men of Boruku go at dawn through the pass, with myself at their head. The Matsuyama will see me, for you shall lend me the armor that you wear. It is you that they seek, as I said. What will it be but the loss of twenty and myself to prove I speak the truth?

"From yonder crag the pass can be seen. Watch you there. If the black-armored knights of the Matsuyama fall not upon us, then will mine own

hand cut out my entrails with my sword. Is it enough?"

Rennoske stood silent, legs apart, head bowed, lip between thumb and forefinger.

"It shall be as thou sayest," he answered, "O Man with the Scar upon his Breast."

"Quickly, quickly!" Rennoske cried, as the tall figure of the seal-hunter stalked from them among the sleeping figures in the faint light of a misty moon. "Yukitaka, Sorrowful Father, Takagi! There is work for us to-night!"

The three gathered close about him, for he spoke in a soft voice.

"Listen, ye who are my brothers. This man has always been mine enemy. The reasons matter not. His talk sounds fair indeed, yet he may play me false. A plan comes to me whereby we may be safe either way.

"If the Matsuyama are hidden as he says, halfway up the pass, they must be close to the way we would come by. Suppose we climbed the mountains on this end from both sides? Would we not be above and behind them?

"If Osaki plays us false, it will be an easy matter to fall upon him. Yet perchance the seal-hunter tells the truth. The Matsuyama will attack him and the men of Boruku. Could we not fall

upon them from behind, driving them into each other, tumbling upon the rocks? Thus would the ambushers be ambushed. Do I speak with reason?"

Yukitaka alone found his voice.

"The divine light of the gods themselves shines upon your mind. Heaven blessed you are — a thousand times!"

Rennoske ignored the praise; his brain throbbed with action.

"Thou, Takagi," he commanded, still in a whisper, "lead thou the farmers and the fishers up the right slope. Travel quickly but softly. See yonder peak that shows velvet-black. Halt there. Sorrowful Father!"

"Here, O leader!"

"Take thou the mountaineers and the woodmen up the left slope. The way is hard and stony. Yet they are surefooted and slow. Halt opposite where Takagi stays. Thou understandest?"

"Well, O leader."

"My signal shall be my waved sash from the crag where the pine tree stood. Thou canst see plainly — nay, we will light a fire. The smoke rising blue shall be the signal. Then swoop down upon them like the hawk — drive them before you like swine! Brothers-in-arms, the fate of the Matsuyama is in thy hands!"

"At dawn, then, we shall move up the mountain?" questioned Takagi.

"At dawn!" cried Rennoske. "Nay, at dawn ye shall be there. Now — now — now! Move quickly — move softly! At dawn thou must watch the crag where stood the pine tree. At the first puff of smoke — strike! If we meet not again, O my brothers — *Saianara*, I salute you!"

"*Saianara*, we salute you," answered Takagi and the Sorrowful Father. They turned and walked out of the red, flickering circle of light cast by the torch on the ground.

Chapter XXIII

Like Black Ants and Brown

A LIGHT drizzle of rain fell upon Yukitaka and Rennoske as they lay upon the crest of the peak, eyes riveted on the east. The first faint gray had just illumined the sky, yet there was hardly enough light for the scene below to be revealed to them.

There was a rustling of dry leaves. The young man knew it to be his companion piling high the fuel for the fire. The light grew until, faintly outlined against it, the mountains showed a black and jagged jumble. Slowly their crags and boulders came into view. Slowly the ravine became distinguishable.

Not a moving thing was seen upon the long and narrow panorama. Rennoske sat upon his haunches watching and watching. And now, plainly seen, the narrow way between the walls caught the rain-filtered light, while the rain-polished rocks threw it back again in a weird effect. Rennoske still watched the entrance. Then he saw them.

How boldly they walked, these men of Boruku,

the white bands about their heads showing tiny specks against the gray. Four abreast they entered between the walls, like minnows into the open jaws of a shark. And at their head, the armor glistening, walked the boldest of all — Osaki!

How could he doubt him? There could be no sham there in those straight shoulders, that determined stride. Yet he must watch, watch, watch!

Fainter and fainter grew the bands of white; onward they went between the dark shadow of the mountain walls, the armored figure at their head. Rennoske saw Osaki turn, his face but a pin point of brown against the shadow. He saw the fishermen change from four abreast to two. Osaki's sword now waved in the air as if he were motioning his followers forward.

No, he was doing more than that. Like some tinkling of memory, a sound came to him, hurled from rock to rock, borne upward on the misty wind. Osaki had shouted something — a command — what could it mean?

Rennoske must now half close his lids and peer out, searching the depths of that narrow defile, for the men of Boruku marched quickly. At every step they moved deeper and deeper into the shadow.

What was that? Black and shining, it moved among the rocks. He watched it, but could not tell what it was. Following it, other black, shining things

sprang up from behind the boulders, out of cracks and crevices, till the pass was filled with them.

At the other side of the ravine his eye was caught by more black things that popped up like jack-in-the-boxes that a gnome's child might play with. He saw a sword waved, heard a faint shout, and the black things seemed to crawl like black ants, downward on both sides. Like the coats of black beetles the armor shone. The ants now flashed forth something silver gray.

And now black swarm and white-topped minnows came together. The silver-gray things circled, swept, flashed high, and circled again.

Thus it appeared to Rennoske, upon the top of the peak, as he looked down.

Had he been nearer he would have seen the men of Boruku, but twenty against a hundred, with two hundred more behind them, fighting the fight of desperate men. Knowing certain death was before them, they faced that death with eyes shining, heads erect, standing firm, while they gave back blow for blow.

Osaki seemed to bear the strength of a demon. Surrounded by a ring of swirling swords, he parried and swung out, dealing swift death with his borrowed weapon. But the borrowed armor was broken in many places — Osaki's blood mingled with the blood of the victims of his blade, though he still stood,

cutting and slashing like a man possessed. At death he laughed as he swung wide and hard.

None of these details of carnage could Rennoske see from his aerie. But he had seen enough to convince him that the Matsuyama were hidden in ambush and that the men of Boruku were falling fast. He thought quickly, that if the black-armored soldiers discovered that the seal-hunter was not himself, they might be on their guard. He called to Yukitaka, "The fire! Light the fire!"

There was the snap of the tinder box — a cough from the old man and another snap. Two sparks fell on unresponding leaves.

Rennoske turned in a panic. The leaves were wet! There were three more snaps; still the spark did not catch.

In a fever he turned his eyes again quickly upon the ravine. The moving white specks among the black were few now. What if Takagi and the Sorrowful Father saw no signal!

A sputter — a crackle — a tiny flame flickered — went out — caught again! Then, with a mighty swirl, the blue smoke rose in a spiral cloud.

Rennoske's hungry eyes turned again to the ravine. What a sight! Were they brown ants — bees — flies? Down they swarmed upon the black! Their yells came up on fitful gusts of wind. They broke — no, it was the black that spread.

He saw the Matsuyama, no longer intent on slaying the peasants, try to escape from the unexpected trap. Some ran pellmell into the pass and were lost in the shadow. Others, swinging their blades before them, cut a path through the thick swarm as it came down, like a fly trying to climb up the inside of a bottle, against a stream of water trickling through its top.

Some went up ten, some twenty, some as high as fifty feet. But down they rolled, turning over and over as they went, sweeping from under them alike the feet of pursued and pursuer. Spear was doing stabbing work, broadax singing a merry tune upon the black armor!

Then there were those in the pay of the Black Boar who did not care to brook the dangers of either a peasant-swarming ravine or a peasant-swarming incline. These ran straight for the mouth of the pass, thinking to escape over the foothills, taking a cross-country path to the east road and the palace.

Alas! such quickly formed plans for escape were as quickly frustrated as made. Instead of open country and a clear road, they came face to face with eight and sixty knights, armed with short sword and long, armored and helmeted, waiting grimly for their coming.

What little courage was left after their surprise,

the last vestige of it vanished then. They rushed upon the Knights of the Purple Lotus, all cunning and swordsmanship thrown to the winds.

Here was no question of rudely armed peasants, where every blow told on exposed flesh. They were fighting soldiers — knights like themselves, fully and splendidly equipped, prepared and ready for the fray.

The black-armored men were paid to fight for the house of the Mountain of Pines. They fought, and well. The Knights of the Purple Lotus were paid to fight for their *Daimyo*, the Little Tiger of Katsu and Nokodate. They were not fighting for him now; but he had sent them there to fight for the man they called Little Warrior. The Little Tiger had a reputation of being splendidly obeyed.

What mattered who they fought for? They fought because it was their business. They fought because there were swords in their hands and a foe before them. Rennoske saw them fight, but he heard not the song of their swords.

The long sword bit through helmet and breastplate. The short slid under the joints of armpit, apron, thigh plates, and through the gorget lacings. If the swarm in the defile had been furious, this trained file was, in its calm, cool way, doubly effective.

"Come, Yukitaka," said Rennoske, turning. "We

had best descend. Much blood flows below. Like a groaning table heaped with viands, to a full man, it sickens me."

True as was his sentiment, there was hardly the tone of disgust in his voice. Much blood flowed below; but it was the blood of his foes. There was no joy in watching them slaughtered, yet there was the little voice within him that cried: "The victory is thine. Thou hast planned it!" And though the spoils of war were gruesome, he was entitled to them.

Down the spiral path they toiled. It was slow work, for the way was slippery from the rain. An hour it took them, the wind-borne shouts growing louder at each step.

As for the fight, they saw no more of that, for the hill was between them and it. At length they reached the foot of the slope and walked toward the jutting fir tree.

Rennoske gave but a glance at the ground between himself and the pass. Hideous black and red things lay upon it in an ominous trail. There was a flash and a shout now and then from the ravine, with an undernote of a clanking and clattering din.

There was something in the shadow of the tree that made him quicken his steps.

They were taking off his armor, the two Knights

of the Purple Lotus who brought him there. He lay upon the ground, his handsome face drawn and pale, a great purple stain on the blue kimono they had thrown over him. He smiled bloodily up at Rennoske. All the scorn was in the smile still.

"Who lies now?" he hiccuped faintly. "I fling my life at you!"

"Osaki — Osaki!" Rennoske murmured, kneeling beside him. "Canst thou not forgive?"

"Nay, and I cannot!"

There was still the vestige of a snarl in the seal-hunter's weak voice.

"I am not so much to blame, Osaki. Thou didst threaten me. Was it not meet I should have doubted thee?"

"*Hei* — what matters that now? The words of Osaki are not many."

"Then tell me — what changed thee from mine enemy into my friend?"

"No friend am I — to my duty let this cursed moment be placed!"

"Duty, Osaki? I pray thee speak on."

Osaki raised himself on his elbow. His voice came slowly and painfully:

"You vanquished me at the house of Miyoshi and shamed me before my bride. Can I love you for that? I wandered all that night, shamed to return home — brideless. Wandering in the woods

by Boruku I heard voices. A dwarf one was, the other a hag of a woman. From them I learned —"

A racking cough shook the seal-hunter's frame. His head rolled from side to side while he gasped for breath.

"Aye, aye, Osaki," Rennoske whispered tensely. "The strangling of the dwarf and the woman — that was thy work, was it not?"

Osaki found strength enough to nod.

"Yukitaka, many of my followers, and the Purple Lotus Knights came at thy word?"

After a long spell of coughing the nod came again.

"Yet tell me why, Osaki. Why shouldst thou do this for me who once threatened my life?" He caught the sailor by the kimono sleeve. "Clear the mystery, Osaki, tell me why."

Osaki croaked hoarsely, every word a terrible effort:

"Have you not had enough? Through you have I not lost all?"

The effort was too much for him. He fell back, gasping and coughing.

Rennoske twisted the kimono sleeve in his sweating palm.

"Speak, Osaki — for the love we both bear Kiku San — speak!"

The seal-hunter turned upon him a wild, glassy-

eyed stare. His jaw worked. He spoke each word between a soul-racking gasp:

"I learned — hag of hell — throttled them — ha! ha! You were the one — the true — the Pr— *hei* — !"

"Yes, Osaki!" exclaimed Rennoske. "I am what?"

The sailor struggled to his elbow again, while his waving arm pointed a finger at Rennoske. His eyes protruded in his effort to speak; but all that came from his throat was a rattling, throaty gurgle.

"What — what — what?" screamed Rennoske, as he saw the man topple on the brink of death. Once he had almost told him on the sands of Boruku, again in the house of his foster-father. In his fear lest the secret of his identity would go with the seal-hunter, he tugged at the blue kimono sleeve.

"Speak, Osaki! Who am I?"

Osaki raised his hand above his head, saluting the man before him.

"Gods spare him!" cried Rennoske. "Speak, Osaki!"

But Osaki fell back, his lips forever silent.

Chapter XXIV

A Crawling Thing in the Grass

A FLOCK of herons rose screeching from the marsh at the approach of heavy footsteps. Their armor bright in the noonday sun, two men trampled the green reeds, bending and crushing them under foot.

"Come, Yoshida," called the first clanking warrior, emerging upon the white highway; "it is time we showed ourselves."

"So — and glad I am," answered the other, stamping the mud from his steel shin-plates. "Another hour in that slippery black ooze and I would soon commit *hara-kiri*, and well I might, for methinks that will be our end anyway, O Mori."

"And thou, too, hast caught the infection, Yoshida," answered the first speaker with a sneer. "Dost fear the ugly player's mask, and art frightened like a silly peasant at a *Kabuki*?"

"*Kabuki* mask indeed!" answered Yoshida, the stouter and rounder-faced of the two, a man who loved his raw carp and rice, his geisha upon his lap,

and his hot *sakkee*. "Yet it is better sitting in the shade of a camphor tree than to chase thus after a bloodthirsty peasant."

"Thou art droll, O Yoshida," answered the slim and pious-faced Mori, cadaverous-cheeked and hollow-eyed. "A wildgoose chase it is not, for a sharp-edged sword upon a velvet pillow awaits our failure. Thou art wrong, though, concerning the talk of peasant. Did not the Old Fox tell us the man was the prince himself?"

"How, now?" answered Yoshida, puffing from a stumble over a stone. "What base treason is this? There is but one true prince, the Kuroki Obutu, and he reigns in the land. Thankful am I for it. A lover of ease like myself is the Black Boar. What talk is this of other princes?"

Mori peered cautiously about; then, satisfying himself that he was unheard in that desolate sunlit waste and there were no ears in the willow and reed lined road, he spoke confidently to his companion:

"Between thou and me, O Yoshida, there should be agreement most perfect. Well dost thou know that the throne belongs to the Ackagawa, and the man we are sent to slay is Rennoske, rightful *Daimyo* of that house."

"Indeed," answered Yoshida. "This interests me. I paid but little attention while the baron spoke, my mind being upon a Chinese dish — a

soft kind of bird's-nest — I had for dinner. It was only when his high excellency declared my life would be forfeit if we did not slay this fellow, who, methought he said, was a peasant. Tell me more."

"There is little else to tell," continued Mori. "The boy was taken from the court when he was twelve, on the day of his father's death, by one Hida, his sword teacher. The baron sought to slay them in the summer palace by the Inland Sea, long since burned in that fight.

"It seems that by some means the Prince Rennoske escaped and has dwelt these twelve years among the people of the mountains. Yet the strangest part of the tale is that the young man knows not that he is the prince, for a blow with a sword in the hands of the Black Boar when they were children, robbed him of his memory and makes him at times an imbecile, and to — Yoshida, thou art not listening! Is it the edible bird's-nest of China again?"

Yoshida snorted.

"Listening? Aye, and plenty have I heard! It is enough that he is the son of the Ackagawa dynasty, for they were rice eaters always, with not a carp or ape for dinner from one full moon to the other."

"Then wilt thou think still less of the son," laughed Mori; "for thy fat must subsist upon millet and barley, with now and then a parboiled bamboo sprout."

"Ugh!" grunted Yoshida. "Of all things, I hate millet worst, excepting it be barley; and if a bamboo sprout be not well cooked I would sooner starve than eat it. This being so, I will send this insolent rebel hellward before I have eaten one of his filthy meals."

"Softly, Yoshida," said Mori; "we must work slowly. First his confidence must be gained, so we may be near him while he sleeps. I will try first, Yoshida, and if I fail, then will it be thy turn. Listen —"

And heads together the two knights walked slowly along the dusty, sunlit road.

Rennoske had made his camp on the other side of the ravine, for owing to the complete rout of the Matsuyama host, it took almost a day to gather together his blood-lusted peasants.

They had pursued the fleeing black-armored knights far up the mountainside, returning with captured swords, helmets, and breastplates.

The wily baron had underestimated the strength and cunning of his foe, for the ambushing party had consisted of few more than three hundred men, of which less than a hundred had escaped. The peasants lost sevenscore, including the ill-fated men of Boruku.

Even though the opposing army had been so small,

the victory was not so hollow as it seemed. What if the ambush had succeeded? What if the dead Osaki's warning had not come?

Taken unawares, their army cut in half, the effect of the sudden appearance of the soldiers, all experienced men, would have had its effect on the excitable peasants. Rout would have been sure, Rennoske's death certain. Without him their spirit would be broken and the entire cause lost. As for the Knights of the Purple Lotus, although they had fought nobly with a winning cause, their mettle was yet to be tried by defeat. After all, it was no quarrel of theirs.

Yet victory, and complete victory, had shone on Rennoske's arms. There were some two hundred experienced warriors fewer in the pay of his enemy, while his own men had seen the bloody clash of arms and heard the death-rattle in the throats of their companions.

Valiantly they had borne up under the test. Yes, thought the young leader, as he stood upon a flat rock in the shade of a shelving one above, victory, and complete victory, had been his.

"Might I humbly beg, O leader," said Takagi, coming up to him, "to know what are your plans?"

"I would fain remain here over night, O Takagi," he answered. "Then the men will be rested for an early march at dawn."

"Will not this give our enemy a chance to gather their forces and cross the Obigawa?" asked the Sorrowful Father, speaking from the rock on which he squatted.

"It does not so occur to me," Rennoske replied quickly. "Those who escaped have ere this rejoined their companions. They will bring news that the Little Warrior and his men have come through the pass, and march onward. Then will they probably move to this road through the marsh lands, thinking to head us off before we reach the plain before the palace.

"In truth we shall turn to the left, and by a day's march come upon the banks of the Obigawa. The stream here is far from the sea and shallow. Half of our army will ford, the other half remaining on the right bank. Thus we will move toward the palace on both sides of the river.

"If we encounter the Matsuyama on either side, our force is enough, though divided, to hold them in check, while those of us on the other bank will rush onward to the palace that will be almost defenseless. What shall the host of the Matsuyama do then, thinkest thou, O Takagi?"

The tea-planter and the Sorrowful Father answered nothing. Yukitaka, lying upon his back in the cool shade of the rocks, muttered something about the divine light of the gods themselves shining on a mind.

And he shook his old head, rubbing his bald spot upon the smooth stone.

A bare-legged woodman came suddenly into the silence where Rennoske stood.

"There are two knights come, O leader," said the man with deferential bow. "They say their business is urgent, and offer to leave their swords with me as a token of their peaceful intentions."

Yukitaka sprang up hurriedly.

"Perhaps the Matsuyama sue for peace, Little Warrior," he cried. "Oh, grant it not! It is not that the sharp tusks of the boar may heal the havoc of blood and terror he has wrought. Oh, grant it not!"

"Grant it not," said the Sorrowful Father and Takagi together.

Rennoske raised his hand.

"Bid the two knights enter," he said calmly, "and with their weapons. Yet stay — go first to the Knights of the Purple Lotus and ask in my name that four accompany these two hither."

In a few moments the clanking of the six armored men resounded over the rocks. From between the Purple Lotus Knights stepped Yoshida and Mori. The thinner knight knelt, drew both his swords from his sash, hilt foremost, and laid them at the feet of Rennoske. With a grunting effort the stout Yoshida did the same, then both lay, face between palms, upon the black stone.

"Rise, *Samurai*," came Rennoske's voice. "If your business be peaceful, as your offered swords portend, it shall be good for myself and the knights who are my companions."

Mori gave a quick glance to Yoshida, then proceeded in a well-rehearsed voice of submission:

"I am Mori of the Scarlet Poppy, my companion, Yoshida, son of Yoshida of the Ringing Bell, sons of the *Samurai* both. We have come to offer our swords and our service, for they have grown rusty among the geisha.

"We take them from one who scorns them for women's deeds and bring them to one who is a soldier. We take them from one who oppresses and give them to one who offers freedom. We take them from the service of the Black Boar and offer them to the man they call Little Warrior."

So unexpected was the message that Rennoske and the three stood speechless.

"Right our wrong, O man they call Little Warrior," croaked Yoshida. "Bid us rise — and join you."

"*Ye* have wrongs?" asked Takagi with a stinging emphasis on the first word.

"Aye," answered the stout knight. "The Black Boar gave us bad food."

"Our wrongs are many, O leader," Mori said quickly. "There are others at the side of the Black

Boar who eagerly await your coming. The court totters amid licentiousness."

The Sorrowful Father groaned.

"The women rule; all true men await your coming. Many would have joined you ere this, but they feared your feelings against the Matsuyama would be too bitter to welcome any who had partaken of their meager bounty. Thus are they between two fires. We, whose wrongs at the hands of the Matsuyama are many as the cattails upon the marsh, could wait inactive no longer. I had the promise, too, of many who but waited to see how we were received ere they, too, offered their swords at your feet."

Mori was bold enough to look up at the face of Rennoske to see what effect his words had had. The leader stood in deep thought. The shadow from the rock above darkened half of his face. He started from his reverie.

"Rise, Knight of the Scarlet Poppy," he said. "Rise, Knight of the Ringing Bell."

Yoshida puffed, relieved, and scrambled to his feet.

"You are welcome among our host," Rennoske continued. "Thy words are fair, O Mori, a place ye shall both have at my side."

Mori shot another quick glance at Yoshida and the knights bowed low again, offering a thousand thanks.

Rennoske spent the afternoon among his men,

showing those who had swords taken from the Matsuyama how to use them. Until late in the evening he drilled them, never tiring, his heart in his work. Though they were an incongruous lot, a pudding-faced fellow here and there under an ill-fitting helmet, a brawny chest sweating under an unaccustomed breastplate or shirt of chain-mail, yet they had in their frank, slanting eyes the light of idolatry that made his heart beat high.

He ate a silent meal with Yoshida, Mori, and the three, and after a round of his camp-fires, where he had a cheery word for all, went to his resting-place. But sleep would not come. A sharp pain at the back of his head disturbed him. He dared not think of what it might portend.

Ever and anon, like the droning of bees, came Yoshida's sleepy voice in answer to questions put to him by the Sorrowful Father who asked for news of his son. This too soon died away into silence.

There were two more under that shelving rock who could not sleep. The first was Mori, because he would not. The other was Yukitaka, because he could not. When the wind swept over the marsh, sending the rustle of it to his ears, the Knight of the Scarlet Poppy would sit up and peer about him under cover of the noise. Once he even tried to creep toward Rennoske.

But with every stir, with every move, Yukitaka

moved with him. Mori heard and felt, even though he could not see, that he was watched, felt that the keen eyes of the old student were upon him. Fearing lest he should betray himself too soon, he let himself fall softly to sleep.

At dawn the little army arose and moved onward. The way was hard, for they struck through the black ooze of the marsh under a broiling hot sun. All day they marched in the stifling heat, yellow faces shining sweaty, brown legs caked with sticky mud. In the evening they came upon the banks of the Obigawa and, tired, hungry, and thirsty, made a hurried camp, first cooling their weary feet in the stream.

Two men took advantage of the bustle of preparation for a whispered conversation under a drooping, sheltering willow.

"It must be to-night, Yoshida," said the first. "I hear from the man they call Takagi that they will be upon the plain before the palace upon the afternoon of tomorrow, or at dawn of the second day hence. Listen then — lie thou far from the prince. Stir not, unless I call. Yet there is that which thou must do. When the stillness and the darkness that comes before the dawn are at hand, creep to where he lies. If he is alive, strike with this dagger, run to the river, and swim the stream. There will you find me under yonder fir, whose gnarled branch

spreads o'er the stream like a brown crooked elbow. Dost thou understand?"

"Aye," answered Yoshida, taking the knife. "I have borne enough of this dog's insolence. I shall strike then, if thou failest. Failing or not, I am to meet thee by yonder ape's elbow of a tree before the dawn."

"It is agreed then," said Mori, through set teeth. "Let us return ere we rouse suspicion."

By separate ways the two knights walked toward Rennoske and the three. The night was dark. The river ran by swiftly, the lap of it among the reeds and the muddy shore was made doubly loud by the silence in tree and grass, of bird and insect.

The army of the Little Warrior slept on the sloping bank of the Obigawa, heads pillowed on sinewy arms or flat upon broad backs in the waving grass. The willows waved over them — tired and worn, sailor beside mountaineer, fisherman beside shepherd, woodman breathing deeply beside weary farmer.

Yoshida lay alone twoscore feet from the water's edge. It was an uncomfortable night for him, son of Yoshida of the Ringing Bell! He had taken off his armor in the expectancy of his early morning swim. He cursed the thought that he had first looked upon as a stroke of genius, for sharp stones stuck into his fat back. He turned on his side, then reared up

again with a smothered howl as a thick bunch of stubble sank into his flabby flesh.

First it was the gnats that flew persistent about his head, tickling his nostrils. Now it was the mosquitoes that buzzed about his thick neck and stung his bare arms and ankles.

When at length the insects left him, borne away by a sharp, chill breeze that froze him to the marrow, he fain would have slept. Sleep he dared not, lest he should be sleeping in that horrible hour before the dawn.

Ugly sounds came to his ears. At first he thought it was crawling crocodiles and started up with damp and bristling hair. No, it was but these pigs of peasants — they snored — curse them!

Ever and anon he heard other sounds where Rennoske, Mori, and the three lay. Each clink, each stir, each deep breath chilled his blood. Was that it — was that Mori's knife striking deep?

Yoshida had known no such night of misery in all the three and thirty years of his life. At length he heard a faint splash and the paddle, paddle of hands growing fainter over the water.

The gods of his ancestors be praised — it was done then! The peasant prince was slain, for Mori swam the river.

Yet there was work — disgusting menial work ahead for Yoshida, son of Yoshida of the Ringing

Bell. An hour he waited. He took the dagger and placed it between his teeth — it was the calm before the dawn.

Lying flat upon his stomach, he crawled and wriggled through the long grass, a foot — a yard — a dozen yards. And now an armored foot stuck up out of the grass beside him. He crawled toward the face — it was Takagi.

Further he crept. His hand felt something stiff and cold. He peered close to it — it was another hand. He followed it up — to the elbow — on to the shoulder. He saw a still chest under a motionless kimono.

He looked at the face. The jaw hung loose, drooping inward, the nose was pinched. The eyes were wide open and stared glassily upward. It was the face of the man they called Little Warrior!

Some one stirred at the other side of him. Yoshida became panic-stricken. What if they should find him there by the side of their dead leader, the knife in his teeth? Mori's knife had done its work. The man was dead — quite dead.

There was another movement and a deep breath beside him. His only thought was escape before they discovered him. Yoshida crawled down the steep bank and, parting the reeds, slid head foremost into the water.

There was another splash behind him!

Chapter XXV

The Rustling Reeds of Pursuit

WITH a rapidity that was remarkable even to himself, Yoshida swam the cold water of the Obigawa. The first splash had increased now to three; distinctly he heard them above his own puffing and splashing.

How many there were it mattered not. There was enough terror to clutch icily at his heart.

Had Mori escaped and was he alone the scapegoat? Would they torture him with fire or water if he were caught? These and like horrible questionings coursed through his brain as he plowed, porpoise-like, through the water.

At length his feet touched the mud of the bottom. He sank deep in it up to his ankles. Gods — he was stuck there, like a fat ox!

He heard behind him the soft, cuplike splash of the swimmer's hands. Every second brought them nearer. Yoshida gritted his teeth and with a mighty leap landed face downward in the water. But he gained what he sought, for as he fell he stretched his

arms at full length, and his hands gripped the base of the reeds. He felt them twined about his fingers. Then a tug — a mighty pull — and dripping, muddy, slimy, he emerged upon the bank and fell crashing into the grass!

But there was no rest for him. There was a splash and a sucking sound behind him and he knew his pursuers had reached the mud.

Through the grass he wriggled, squirmed, and twisted, his object the fantastic tree that was now faintly seen against the gray of the east. A snake wriggled slimy over his back. He screamed, stood up, and ran toward the tree.

A black something rushed at him, an arm ran round his waist, and a hand was laid tightly upon his mouth. Caught! No, his bulging eyes looked into the face of Mori.

"Swine!" whispered the other knight in his ear. "Wouldst wake the whole camp with thy yelling and have them after us?"

For Yoshida had answered never a word; but Mori, Knight of the Scarlet Poppy, read in the other's horror-lined face the truth — read that they were fugitives in this marsh land, fugitives with a band of death-robbed peasants after them who would — why dwell upon that thought, there was already a rustling in the reeds close to him.

"Follow me for your life!" he cried, releasing his

hold on the quaking Yoshida, and darted among the reeds. Would it never end? thought the stout knight. He kept Mori's back as his guide as he stumbled through the mud and grass. He dared not look below, lest some twisted black root of a sunken stump make him think a snake lay coiled to strike. He dared not look behind lest he should see the leering face of a peasant through the bars of grass.

Slowly the light in the east grew. More clearly he saw Mori's back that every moment grew smaller and smaller. Could it be that the other was running away from him? He stopped, his breath spent, his heart thumping like a hound-chased rabbit.

R-r-r-rustle — sweep!

It was the tall grass behind him! He did not look back, but with the strength born of terror, ran on through the mire, closing in on Mori's disappearing back with every frantic leap from bog to bog.

"Mori! Mori!" he panted, spent again after a struggle of a quarter of a mile. "Halt — I can go no further!"

To his relief he saw Mori stop. Dragging his lead-seeming feet after him he came to the bog where the thin knight stood.

But something in the attitude of Mori, Knight of the Scarlet Poppy, made him hold his peace. The expression on the cadaverous face was terrible, the eyes but mere slits in the head that lay sunk upon

his chest. Yoshida followed the direction of the other's gaze.

In the first pink rays of the rising sun he saw, through the grass, a peasant armed with a heavy club, coming directly toward them. Gods — had they been surrounded then?

The peasant looked up and saw them. With a yell he sprang out at the two, swinging his weapon. Quickly did Mori move. He crouched upon his haunches as the man came toward him. The peasant, impelled by his sudden leap, fell sprawling over Mori's shoulders. Yoshida saw something gleam in a circle — it was Mori's knife. He heard the man on the ground utter a groan.

Then looking behind him, Yoshida saw something. Another peasant had just parted the reeds and was moving cautiously upon Mori, who still crouched upon the ground. Yoshida, terror and the fear of death turning him suddenly insane, lowered his head and, bellowing like a bull, ran madly at the man, butting him in the pit of the stomach!

"Quick! The river!"

In a panic Yoshida turned to the right and followed blindly on. He cared not now where his feet trod; snakes or crocodiles had no terror for him. Mori's cry of "the river" echoed through his brain.

The river? Aye, anywhere out and away from this! Whether Mori meant to swim or drown him-

self mattered not in that wild moment. The water was cool and would awaken him. How he longed to lie down and sleep in the mire, like a hog!

The other knight had reached the bank of the stream. Instead of splashing through it, Yoshida saw that he crept slowly out until the water reached his chest. The stout knight did likewise.

"Keep thy head under water and splash not," came Mori's whisper.

Yoshida, like an infant, obeyed. Twice he sank, his strength ebbing fast; but the booming roar of the water in his ears spurred him on again to move his arms and legs like an automaton, and he reached the opposite bank.

Still following Mori's back, he stumbled on, this time under the overhanging branches of a grove of willows that grew close to the water's edge. The gods of his ancestors be praised — Mori sat upon the ground. With the last spurt of his strength he came beside him and fell face downward upon the ground, a worn-out, quivering lump of exhausted flesh!

How long he slept he knew not — but a hand was tugging at his shoulder. He started up, thinking he was caught at last. But it was only Mori.

"Awake, Yoshida," the slim knight whispered. "None follow us. We have escaped. I would question thee."

"So," he answered, "I thought thee a bloodthirsty peasant. Thy knife sings a good song, O Mori. First the Imbecile, then those who pursue us. A noble welcome we will have at the hands of the old fox."

"You killed him then?" hissed Mori.

"What was the need?" answered Yoshida with a shiver. "The man was already dead. I felt his icy hand, saw his hanging jaw and staring eyes as he lay upon the ground. We have had a fearsome time of it, but the prince of the Ackagawa is dead."

"Yet you struck home to make sure when you reached him?" Mori spoke in a tense whisper.

"And wherefore?" Yoshida replied, with another shiver. "Why should I strike a dead man? Moreover, there came the stirring beside me that made me fear for my life, and indeed it was one I had awaked as what happened since showed. Struck home to make sure? Gods of my ancestors, a man can be killed but once!"

"Son of a thousand apes!" cried Mori. "What needed we of this cowardly running from swine? I came not near the prince, for the dog Yukitaka lay ever between us. It was all I could do to escape."

"But —"

"Fool! fool! fool! That which you took for death was only the man's strange sickness — the mark of the Black Boar's sword!"

Mori rose with an effort, then turned to the staring Yoshida.

"I think under yonder spreading willow tree is a good place to die," he said slowly. "Wilt thou join me or do the deed here alone?"

But Yoshida, son of Yoshida of the Ringing Bell, never answering, rose and ran screaming from the shade of the trees out into the sunlight, toward the palace.

Chapter XXVI

A Blow with the Same Sword

"LOOK you, O leader!" cried Yukitaka. "The river runs red in the morning sunlight."

Rennoske looked.

Red ran the river between the green-reeded banks toward the palace. A red river flowed toward the palace and Red River was his name. The omen was good, but Rennoske knew it not. Prince Rennoske of the Ackagawa knew not yet his identity.

To himself, in lieu of something better, he was still the son of Miyoshi the Farmer. As such, and as such only, he had come to be the leader of more than two thousand men. Fate had played its part. Another's help had added to the roll; so had a primitive form of advertisement, the written words on the trees. Yet behind it all, the young man's splendid spirit was paramount. So much again for hereditary training and innate warlike instinct.

As was the usual thing, the spell of his illness of

the night before gave him a brighter view of things in the morning. It was as if the cogs of a wheel had slipped, and on being repaired again, worked more smooth than before.

"What is it, O Takagi?" he asked of the tea-planter, who stood by him with questioning eyes.

"The knights Yoshida and Mori?" he responded. "They are gone, O leader! Their armor lies upon the ground e'en where they slept."

"How sayeth thou? What means this?"

"'Tis not so much of a loss," croaked Yukitaka, his tongue in cheek and his little eyes twinkling merrily. He had had an early morning interview with four sturdy peasants. "Perhaps the simple fare of our camp was too coarse for the honorable Yoshida's stomach. Yet I fancy the breakfast the baron hath prepared for him will be hardly to his liking. As for the knight Mori — he lies upon his back in the tall grass, his wide-open eyes admiring the top branch of a waterside willow."

And Yukitaka's eyes twinkled into the understanding eyes of Rennoske.

The order was given for the men to bathe in the stream and that they should not spare themselves anything they wished for breakfast. This gave them the hint that they would either feed that night upon the stored-up rice of the baron, or eat the food dead men required — none at all.

"But *hei!*" said they. "Let us eat anyway, for if we go empty among the spirits, we must wander about kitchens in search of the food we went hence without."

The start was made about an hour after sunrise. According to the plans, the army was to be divided, each half moving along either side of the stream.

The knights of the Purple Lotus split into an even thirty-two, taking the van to give the advance a more imposing front. The Sorrowful Father and Takagi were to take charge of the body on the right bank, while Rennoske and Yukitaka took command of the one on the left. Final orders and commands came from the leader, of course, whose plan the movement was.

Soon the water was a-splash as the fishers felt for the ford with long boughs of willow. Finding bottom as they walked, they stood in double file, while those less experienced in the ways of the waters passed laughing and shouting between.

One of Rennoske's bronze toe-caps was already in the water. He turned to where Takagi and the Sorrowful Father stood upon the bank above him. He looked into their eyes. His chin was held high. Firm and untrembling were his lips as he spoke:

"Thou, O Takagi, and thou, too, O Sorrowful Father. We are now upon the last spoke of our wheel, the last tempering of our steel. Today our

fate hangs in the balance. To you, brothers both, I entrust one-half of my forces. It is not meet that I call to your minds what rests with you both. Should you meet the foe, hold them and fight to the death. Should I come upon them, then it is your duty to rush onward with all speed to the palace and slay the Black Boar. Doing this, it will be time enough to search for me.

"It is plain that this day many men must fall. It is also plain that we who lead must give courage and show the way, even should we fall ourselves. I ask not that you do more than I. All I shall do that the gods let me.

"Stand firm when you stand; strike hard and deep. Give no quarter till it be asked, and remember that it is for your homes, your wives, and the liberty of the people that you strike. When the blessed fruits of victory are before us, then we may smile indeed, and share them. *Saianara* — I salute you!"

"*Saianari*, I salute you, O leader," repeated Takagi. "If those on one side of the river must fail, Inari and all the gods bear me witness, it shall not be the one on the right bank if I stand and face these dogs alone!"

The Sorrowful Father raised his hand in silent benediction.

Rennoske followed the fisher through the water that came slowly and cool to his chest, then back to

his ankles again. He soon came upon the opposite bank, his armor dripping into the willow-reflected water.

The Knights of the Purple Lotus were drawn up before, his woodmen behind him. He drew his sword.

"Forward, children of the Rising Sun!" he shouted. "Forward for your homes, forward for your freedom! Death to the Matsuyama!"

"Death to the Matsuyama!" repeated the men, clashing and clanking through the brake. The cry rippled and re-echoed over the water.

"Death to the Matsuyama!" it thundered back over the stream from those on the opposite bank.

The advance upon the stronghold of the enemy was begun! Flashing bronze, blue, and silver in the sunlight, reflecting dull upon sweaty face of yellow and knotty leg of brown — snapping of twig, trampling of dry grass, parting of rustling reed. Thus moved the army of the man they called Little Warrior, on both banks of the gentle-flowing Obigawa that fateful August morning.

Slowly the stream widened, smaller grew the sparkling host upon the other green bank. Noon came and early afternoon. Still they marched on.

It was Yukitaka's old eyes that saw them first.

"See, O leader!" he cried out. "See — the Matsuyama!"

"Where?" answered Rennoske, following with his eye the pointing of the long-nailed finger.

"Yonder, upon the sloping, treeless rising, aye, and a goodly number of them."

Rennoske looked upon the other bank of the river. Drawn up in a glistening crescent, there stood the fearsome black armor, motionless and terrible, upon the sloping bank. Rennoske gave the word to halt.

"Gods!" Yukitaka cried. "Here are we divided by the stream, while they are together in a body. Fools we were so to do!"

"Thou forgettest thyself. It is thus I had planned. Watch!"

He stepped to the rippling brink of the river and made a trumpet of his hands.

"O Takagi!" rang out his clear voice. "O Sorrowful Father. Hold them! Drive them back!"

A pause, where the breathing of the peasants sounded loud. "Them ba-a-a-ack!" rang out the echo.

"We sta-a-a-and, O leader!" was wafted back over the water. "We sta-a-a-a-and, O le-e-e-ader!" rang the vibrating echo.

"See!" came Yukitaka's voice. "The black line charges!"

Down the hill the Matsuyama thundered. Fully five hundred they must have numbered; their swords flashed as they tore down, each knight and squire

screaming his battle-cry. An answering yell went up from the peasants.

Rennoske saw the Knights of the Purple Lotus, swords held point outward as they ran in a straight even file, lead the returning charge, while his faithful followers came quickly at their heels, brandishing their spears, axes, and clubs, whirling their new-found swords. It was divinely terrible, terribly beautiful.

But twenty feet separated the onrushing hosts, ten—five—gods! The rending, shrieking, grinding of that crash as they met!

The Knights of the Purple Lotus planted both feet into the soft earth and stood their ground. Then, the long sword swinging wide and the short jabbing straight, they began to kill. The line they made extended but forty yards from end to end.

From behind each end, their front protected, the peasants swarmed. The woodmen came first. So sudden was this flank movement upon the black-armored knights that it took them entirely by surprise. Before they were fully aware of it, broadaxes were swinging about their heads, broadaxes that had spent from ten to twenty years cutting down great oaks, wielded by sturdy arms that had sunk them into the juicy bark. The armor that could stand against them was not among the host of the Matsuyama!

The shepherds and the mountaineers were not far

behind. On numbers they depended, their trick being quickly to single out one knight, then three at him at once, to make short shrift. One pole with its pointed knife was thrust straight for the throat at the gorget lacings, the second aimed for the armpit, while the third pried under the jointed apron for the groin.

Many a knight who served the Black Boar regretted that he had done so, for he fell prone on his face, bleeding from three simultaneous wounds before he had time to raise his sword.

But the fight was not altogether as one-sided as it may seem. One advantage the Matsuyama had. While most of their troop had charged down the hill, there still remained some upon its crest. The archers these were, some fifty-odd.

From their point of vantage they poured down a deadly rain into the thick of the peasants. Their aim was true, the target easy, for it was simple to single out the many-colored, moving mass among the black.

To Rennoske, on the opposite bank, all was a jumble of steel, cloth, and armor, faces, spears, and helmets, with the deafening clamor and shriek of it all. Long could he have stayed and watched that broth of carnage to see how fared his beloved peasants. Aye — how he longed to be with them in their trial! But there was work for him to do.

"Advance, my children!" he shouted. "The way to the palace lies straight ahead. Swift as the morning wind — advance!"

With a shout they broke forward on a run, their hurrying feet making a thumping through the mud and grass. As they began their dash, from the foremost runner to the last straggler, the cry from across the river rang out for them to hear: "We sta-a-a-and, O le-e-e-eader!"

Onward they went!

Once again did the Baron Matsuyama underestimate the cunning of his opponent. He had guarded but one side of the river, hearing from his scouts that the rebellious peasants advanced upon the right side. They had evidently been misled by the fact that he made a camp there and did not cross the stream.

A yell from the archers on seeing the dash of Rennoske's band caused a cessation of their deadly fire. Their commander, thinking to halt the running division, bade his men shoot across the river, at the runners. Most of their arrows fell short, whereupon they ran along the bank, shooting as they went.

Unwittingly, these very archers sealed the doom of their own army. As has been told, their arrows were the most effective means of holding in check the bloodthirsty peasants. These deadly shafts ceasing suddenly, sword, spear, and broadax went at it again with redoubled vigor.

Naturally, the black-armored men looked to see what became of their allies with bow and arrow. Some thought that they fled, while others, divining the true state of affairs, knew that Rennoske and Yukitaka made for the palace. Soon that cry went through the ranks and the archers were followed by a running band of re-enforcements.

The turning-point in the fight was that move. The first file of the Matsuyama supporters were now facing a doubly courageous, death-defying mass of howling peasants, led by strange-looking foreign *Samurai* who fought like demons.

They called for aid — they looked behind for that aid. What did they see but their own former companions-in-arms, stumbling and clattering over the plain, away from them!

It was too much for human instinct, too much for half-hearted desire, to die for a ruler that had not been overzealous in looking after their welfare. By twos and threes, dozens and scores, they, too, turned and ran!

After them, like falcons swooping upon their prey, came the swifter-footed, lighter-equipped peasants, cutting them down as they fled, or taking them prisoners as they flung away their swords and cried for quarter.

Fate now played one of her many strange tricks. In the first battle, when Rennoske met defeat at

the hands of the Black Boar at Hachinohe, a small tributary of a river had been his undoing. It now capped the climax of the defeat of the Matsuyama. It was not the same stream. They had crossed it that morning, further up, where it was narrow and shallow. Here, where it flowed into the Obigawa, it was too broad and deep for armored men either to swim or ford. Fighting peasants behind them, the stream ahead, the army of the Black Boar surrendered in great numbers, while others fled for safety in the adjoining woods.

But how fared his men on the right bank of the river was now no concern of Rennoske's. The palace being his aim, he spurred his followers on in that mile and a half, outdistancing the arrows, till a something rewarded him.

That long, even line of dark-green light and shadow, over there to his left, was that not the famous grove of camphor trees that surrounded the palace grounds? Those long, low buildings, tiled in red, their bamboo sides glistening in the sun through the trees, were they not the very home of the house of the Mountain of Pines? Gods — at last!

As he pointed with his sword and bade his men halt in their double-quick, there was borne to his ears the buzzing of many gongs. A banner waved among the trees — steel glinted — he was to have a fight for it then!

He called a halt to give his men a breathing space. Behind him flowed the river, golden through the fringe of the green banks in the sloping afternoon sunlight. In a succession of green waves, like motionless waves of the sea, toward the long, even line of trees, the ground rolled upward. These trees crossbarred the grouped buildings, fountains, flowers, and blooming shrubs behind them.

A road, or rather a path, led down from them to the water's edge, where a pennon-fluttering barge was fastened to a stone quay, used, no doubt, for pleasure excursions of the court on the river.

The shouting behind him on the right bank came intermittent now on the afternoon breeze that blew gently and peacefully, bearing the sweet scent of river and meadow with it. The buzzing of the gongs, too, died away.

"Woodmen to the right! Yeomen to the left!" he cried. "Knights of the Purple Lotus, on ye I call. Make a square about me. When they tire from the first shock, then will we at them. But hold ye the square. The badger turns in his hole — hold steady — they come!"

Come indeed they did, the last of the Matsuyama, down the slope in a flying wedge. In front the banner, white, bearing a boar's head in black. There might have been fifty to a hundred of them, their battle-cries sounding shrill. Soon each helmet and

breastplate was distinguishable, here a twisted carp, there a chrysanthemum in gold, a white-enameled swan — a bronze tiger's claw.

Yet heraldry counted not for everything — the woodmen's axes fell upon the crests, the swords and spears of the farmers pried under breastplates. In spite of this, the wedge moved ever forward toward the square.

Desperate men, these! To the Black Boar they owed their lives and their livelihood. Slippery was their ground if he fell. Each, like a cornered rat, fought with every ounce of strength. The peasants' ranks were broken through — they crossed swords with the square!

Rennoske, his nails sinking into the wood of his sword-hilt, stood with spread legs in the midst of the clattering, shrieking, groaning, cursing din. The upward parry and downward sweep of a hundred swords gleamed and circled, white and red, all about him. *Crash — thud!* Armor rattled at his feet. A man his own size and stature stood before him. Inky black was his glistening armor, a crimson-dripping sword he held in both hands. Over his helmet, like a monk's hood, was the skin of a black boar's head, under the tusks of which met two black brows over black, snapping eyes. He was face to face with the Black Boar!

"Aha — the Imbecile!" cried the usurper through

the muffling hair. "Now let me finish what I began in my childhood!"

He swung the sword, but the blow fell upon the flat of Rennoske's. There was an answering cut, too swift for the Black Boar's parry. The sword bit deep into the black armor.

There was a roar of pain from the Black Boar. A light of hate seemed to sparkle like fire in his eyes, while he threw himself forward like a madman.

"Matsuyama, *Kuroki Obutu!*" he shrieked.

Somehow the name, the familiar voice, caused a shiver to run through Rennoske's frame. The helmet was a ton on his head, the breastplate was smothering him. What was that which seemed to turn his brain into solid ice, the blood in his veins to icy water? He tried to raise his arms. Gods! He *could not!*

Quick as the darting tongue of a snake, the Black Boar saw his advantage. He circled the sword over his head and brought it down with all his strength upon Rennoske's helmet.

The brass was cloven in two, each half fell clattering to the ground. A thin, bloody gash showed through the hair on Rennoske's scalp!

Again the Black Boar's sword circled, again he swung with all his strength. The blow fell — but on the flat of the sword!

For like the fire of a thousand suns upon the ice

of a glacier, the ice of Rennoske's brain melted; boiling water was in his veins. A name, unknown, unremembered, sprang to his lips. He screamed.

"*Ackagawa, Rennoske!*"

"Gods, he knows!" cried the Black Boar.

That was all he said, for in a twinkling Rennoske's sword cut clean through the boar's skin, helmet, and skull. The Black Boar whirled, fell on his shoulder, turned, writhed, twisted — then he lay still.

Chapter XXVII

Red River and Mountain of Pines

UNDER a heavy canopy of crimson velvet, brocaded with gold and silver thread in odd, fantastic designs representing the deeds of warriors, seated upon a rug composed of the single skin of a huge tiger, was Rennoske, hereditary *Daimyo* of the province.

Hereditary Daimyo of the province! He had been that since his twelfth year; now he was in his twenty-first and but for a week had he known it. For the blow of the Black Boar's sword, the same sword that had caused his malady, cured it by an odd surgical trick.

Daimyo of the province at last! Was it really true? He looked about the long room with its heavy, hand-woven matting of sweet-smelling grass, its hangings of lavender silk, its lamps of suspended glass on coral strings that jingled and tinkled in the soft morning wind.

The Sorrowful Father bent over a couch in the

farthest alcove, where lay his wounded son, the son that had fought with the Black Boar in that last dying rally. The wound, a fleshy one in the shoulder, did not look dangerous, and the father sat and watched with forgiving eyes.

At Rennoske's left, a green inkhorn and many brushes before him, squatted an engrossed Yukitaka, busily engaged in writing on a scroll of rice paper a new code of laws.

The prince, for now he was again, sat thinking of the many events that had happened since he regained the throne of his childhood that had been stolen from him.

Takagi and the Sorrowful Father, as is known, had routed and completely defeated the army of the Matsuyama on the right bank of the Obigawa. Those that had surrendered came along with the victorious peasants and asked permission from Rennoske to gather by the old stronghold of the furious Fifty to discuss the unexpected event of serving a new *Daimyo*, who turned out to be the legitimate ruler of the province.

They sent out emissaries to their fellows who had fled, calling them back to look the new situation in the face. The new *Daimyo*, being no peasant at all, it altered matters in the eyes of these born aristocrats. It came suddenly to their minds how grossly they had been fooled by the Matsuyama.

After all, a *Daimyo* was a *Daimyo* to them, be he House of the Red River or Mountain of Pines. What was the difference so long as they received their *koku*, the so-and-so many bags of rice per year for their wives and families? A vote was taken, and it was the unanimous verdict of the whole three hundred of them to offer allegiance to the Ackagawa by presenting their swords and service at the feet of the Prince Rennoske.

A feast was cleverly ordered, where victorious peasant and defeated *Samurai* sat down side by side. At this banquet Rennoske offered to grant knighthood to any who would swear lifelong fealty to him, for his army was wofully lacking in numbers. Twenty fishers, ten yeomen, and thirty woodmen answered the call.

The climax was capped when he put them in charge of the born *Samurai*, to be taught the gentle art of both manners and warfare. Then he sent the entire combined force of peasant-knight and born noble against the Baron Matsuyama, who had taken refuge in his forest stronghold. It was for their return he was now waiting.

Little by little the greater body of the peasants were returning to their homes. The *godowns*, the great mud storehouses, were thrown open to them and every man given as many bags of rice as he could carry, together with a handful of shining

yen and a promise of lifelong exemption from the provincial land-tax.

Takagi, too, and his fifty coolies had departed, for he had found his daughter, the unhappy wife, and now the happy widow, of one of the Black Boar's slain knights. He had refused Rennoske's offer of a place in the kingdom, saying that a restored daughter and the knowledge that his tea plantations would be free from devastating raids was reward enough.

The Sorrowful Father had been given the lands of Yoshida of the Ringing Bell and delicate palate. He was to take possession of them when his son was well enough to be moved.

Only Yukitaka remained, old Yukitaka, in whose eyes Rennoske read a knowledge of many things. Yukitaka had known who he was, as Osaki had; of that he felt certain.

Under the heavy canopy of crimson velvet, brocaded with gold and silver thread, on a perfect tiger-skin, Rennoske sat and watched old Yukitaka as he mumbled and nodded, the brush in the long-nailed fingers flying fast.

"One thing methinks thou hast forgotten, O Yukitaka," said he. "There is a message for the land of China."

"To what effect, O my prince?"

"One Iwashi and five others dwell there as slaves,

if they are living. Let the next ship bear their ransoms, for they are the crew of the Maya Maru, owned once by the dead seal-hunter who befriended me. Befriended and helped me, though he was mine enemy, befriended me against his will, because he knew me to be the prince. It is thus that I would but poorly repay him."

"It shall be done. Would you deign to write the letter to the *Daimyo* of the Purple Lotus?"

"Nay, for that I will trust thee, being better at the letters than I am. Thou canst tell him I send back the knights, now but seven and fifty, having lost twelve. As a gift there shall be the twelve wagonloads of rice, each drawn by four snow-white oxen — say, too, I will keep the sword and armor as a token of his kindness, and that he may ever call upon me for aid should trouble beset him."

"Spoken well and truly, O my prince," answered Yukitaka, with a grave nod. "Can I write it as well, it shall be a noble message."

And the brush between them, the long-nailed fingers danced over the paper.

Dinner over, and still Rennoske sat, still Yukitaka wrote. Outside the carved and gilded posts that held up the roof of red slate-tiles, the bees droned among the hollyhocks, while the fountain in the broad stone court shone pearly in the afternoon sun.

Not a moving figure was seen among the gardens

of stunted trees, the fantastically trimmed hedges and the star-formed, crescent and circular flower beds, that at even distances from each other, blazed brilliant in the sunlight in variegated hues.

"*Hoi! hoi! hoi!*" sounded through the trees.

Rennoske's eyes brightened, Yukitaka's hand stopped.

"*Hoi! hoi! hoi!*" it came again, a second's pause between each cry, the last louder than the one before it. The staccato shouting reached a crescendo outside the posts, and a palanquin, borne by six tall Koreans, halted.

The gilded shafts were set down by the twelve sturdy arms. From under silken curtains a white-stockinged foot was thrust out of the litter. Another followed it. Soon a stiff, black *haori* over a black kimono came next, a tall man wearing them stood up, straightened himself, and with a majestic air walked between the carved pillars, while he slowly fanned himself.

Thinner was the long black mustache, more wrinkled the aristocratic and haughty face. There was a marked mixing of glossy black silk in the elaborately dressed topknot, a shininess to the shaven head. Yet the skull was as well-formed, the eyes as fiery, the thin-lipped mouth as firm and cruel. Ten years had made but little difference in the face of His High Excellency the Baron Matsuyama.

"Thou sittest in high places, peasant," said he to Rennoske in biting tones. He bowed not, but stood erect as he had entered.

"Surly as ever thou art, O king of foxes," answered Rennoske suavely. "Is it thus thou wouldst sue for peace?"

"'Thou,' not me!" roared the other. "I am His High Excellency the Baron Matsuyama!"

"And 'thou' not me!" answered Prince Rennoske haughtily. "Bow thy head to the earth. No peasant am I. I am Rennoske, Prince of the Ackagawa!"

Terrible must have been the struggle within the baron's soul by the expression of his face. Consternation that Rennoske knew his name and birthright was written there. Hatred, bred of many years, shone from his fine eyes. Yet slowly those eyes lowered under Rennoske's imperious gaze, slowly the knees bent until the baron lay face between palms prone on the matting.

"You have sent for me, O prince," he mumbled. "I am here, a crushed and forsaken old man. What would you of me?"

"Rise, wolf that now whines because he is toothless," said Rennoske in a stinging tone, still squatting on the rug, arms akimbo. "I would many things of thee, O high excellency. There are questions — I look for answers. Hast swallowed thy spleen?"

The baron rose to his feet again, wearily it seemed. He nodded assent, stroking his long black mustache.

"First, O Pine Mountain snake, where is my mother?"

"Thy mother?" echoed his high excellency as if in answer to a ridiculous question. "I recall not thy mother."

"Gods!" cried Rennoske in a rage. "A pair of white hot pincers on thy toes would perhaps make thee more civil. They are to be had and quickly — answer me!"

The baron shivered, his eyes rolled.

"Thy mother is even now among the blessed saints," he faltered. "She died soon after Hida took thee hence."

"Aye — and at thy filthy hands!"

"Nay — by the gods of my ancestors I swear —"

"Silence! There is no oath sacred from thy lips. It is not in me to believe aught that thou sayest. Yet dead I thought she must be. What wouldst thou?"

The baron looked as if he would ask a question, he cringed and bent low.

"There was a woman," he whined. "One Madame Golden Glow. Did it so happen that your sublime highness saw aught of her? Old she was, while a dwarf —"

"Enough," snapped Rennoske. "It pleases me to say that both the hag and the apelike thing, her companion, lie strangled in a rotting *shoji* on the marsh that lies by the white road to Boruku — unless the crows have made a meal of them."

There was the faintest trace of a tear in the baron's eyes, the slightest trembling of his lip.

"She meant to serve me," he muttered, while Rennoske listened with interest. "Her power was waning, she thought, and after the dwarf came out of his sickness and he told her where your highness lay hidden, she went to fetch you, unknown and unbidden by me.

"Yet did I learn of the mountainside *shoji* where you dwelt, or one near it, so I sent a company of knights thither. Poor fool! When they reached there they found you gone. It is to her you owe your life, for in thinking to aid me, she bungled my plans and all the soldiers found in that *shoji* was —"

"Was a defenseless man and woman, whom they slew, and a gentle maiden whom they stole, and then burned the house to the ground," interrupted Rennoske, suddenly remembering the enormity of his wrongs at this man's hands. "It is thus that I would question thee. Where is the maiden they call Kiku San?"

The baron laughed.

"You speak in riddles, O prince. Kiku San — I

know no Kiku San. What have I to do with the lusts of the *Samurai* that were once in my pay. No woman dwells in my palace by that name."

"Fiend!" cried Rennoske, springing to his feet and snatching a short dagger from his sash. "Tell me where lodges the girl or I will deny thee the honor of death at thine own hands. Where is my heaven-sent betrothed?"

"Your betrothed," answered the baron calmly. "Why did you not say so before? Your betrothed, indeed — safe she is in my palace awaiting but the word that makes her your wife."

Rennoske's upraised arm fell limp at his side. He breathed deeply.

"I thank thee for this crumb of comfort," he said thickly. "For once thou hast spared me when thou couldst have struck."

"Your betrothed," the baron went on in pleasant tones, "that is another matter. It was upon this subject I came to visit your supreme highness, though an army howled outside for my blood. The goddess of beauty herself could not be more fair. Health sits upon each cheek and sparkles bright from her eyes."

"And is she sad or cheerful?" asked Rennoske, his anxiety getting the better of his hate.

"Sad always," answered the baron. "Does she not long for you?"

"Aye," the prince sighed. "Thus was it ever, though I was blind to the cause."

"Now do you talk like a true son of the Red River," continued the baron, fanning himself slowly. "An anxiety for your betrothed is but natural. Now talk you like a true prince. Long may you reign in peace. Is this not better than talk of unknown geisha? Is this not better than prating of one Kiku San?"

Rennoske felt like a man awakening on a bed of silk to find a serpent coiled about his neck.

"What meanest thou, smiling villain? One moment thou talkest of my betrothed, and then again dash my hopes to earth. Speak plainly!"

The baron, ruffled, drew back from Rennoske's face that peered close to his.

"Plain enough I speak," answered his high excellency. "You ask for your betrothed. I tell you she is sound and well. I know of no Kiku San or of any betrothal of your imbecility. I mince not words. When I say your betrothed, thus do I mean."

Rennoske laughed wildly.

"It is thou now who art the imbecile," he cried. "To whom am I betrothed if it is not to Kiku San?"

The baron fluttered his fan against his silk-clad chest, ten, fifteen, twenty times. Then came his icy voice.

"I forget your memory failed you, O prince. I recall the day perfectly. Your father stood for you, the commander of his *Samurai* was the middleman, while I stood for my niece, your betrothed, the Princess Misono San."

At first the whole thing struck Rennoske as a huge comedy. He, the *Daimyo*, betrothed before he understood the meaning of the word? And who was the Princess Misono San?

He had an odd memory of a saucy child who threw a teacup at her nurse. It was all too insanely ridiculous for a second thought. And yet —

His father had made the bargain — that made it sacred. There were witnesses — iron-bound custom raised its horrid head to cry, "You must!" No, no, no, he could not!

"Listen, son of the Ackagawa!"

The baron's cold voice sounded through the chaos of his brain.

"The peasants flocked to your standard when you raised it against me. Yet did they all follow? Think you none were with us? We did not grind all, many were stanch to our black.

"What do these think of you? What do our knights of the *Samurai* think of you? Like a tiger behind a screen will there be ever the growlings of revolt. A miserable, hunted life will you lead, and to crush down the spirit of those who would turn

against you, will you oppress and punish — aye — and slay even as we have done."

"Stop, stop, stop!" cried the prince. "I would hear no more!"

But the baron was not to be silenced.

"Look into my face, son of the Ackagawa."

Rennoske looked.

"See the lines of care, see the sleepless nights in mine eyes. See the days of terror on my lips. Thus will it be with you, ever half upon a fence of bamboo, fearing to turn this way or that lest it break beneath you. Thus will it be with you, son of the Ackagawa — thus will it be with you!"

"It is not true! Tell me it is not true, O Yukitaka!" shrieked Rennoske, turning to the old student.

But Yukitaka was silent.

"Like a single path through the heaped-up snows of a mountain, there is a clear way out." The baron was speaking again. "Marry my niece as your father intended. Marry my niece as I would have had you do, had I the last ten years of my life to live again. Then will the houses of the Red River and the Mountain of Pines be joined together in harmony, and the kingdom will dwell in peace."

"Thy way to heaven lies through perdition," Rennoske cried out in agony. "Out, out of my sight,

king of foxes, lying, tempting, slandering devil! Thy path alone lies clear!"

"And I will take it, O prince," the baron answered calmly. "The sword of the Matsuyama is not yet sheathed. Remember that, O son of the Ackagawa. Remember that!"

Slowly fanning himself, the Baron Matsuyama stalked majestically through the carved posts and back to the litter. Soon the *hoi* of the carriers echoed through the still evening air, fainter and fainter. Then it died away, drowned by the droning of the bees and the gentle rustle of the leaves of the lilac bushes.

Yukitaka still wrote. The Sorrowful Father watched his sleeping son. Rennoske, his face like stone, sat under the heavy canopy of crimson velvet, brocaded with gold and silver thread in odd, fantastic designs, representing the deeds of warriors.

Chapter XXVIII

An Honorable Ceremony of Marriage

THE great stone court before the palace that held the throne-room shone with myriad-colored globes. They were the thousand feast lanterns, that hung, row on row, like glow-worms against the soft blue shades of night. They glimmered among the camphor trees; they cast more fantastic shadows behind the fantastic hedges. They shone mellow on the lilac bushes — reflected, wavering images, in the pool before the fountain.

Under the red-tiled roof, inside the building itself, they shone on variegated shades of silk of kimono, sash, and *haori.*

In the throne-room there was apparently a great to-do. A hundred gaily clad men and women were crowded into its low length, with its lavender hangings and coral-beaded, tinkling lamp. In and out among the crowd dainty maidens in blue went soft-footed, bearing lacquer trays on which were dainty porcelain cups filled with steaming rice wine.

Old men drank and bellowed loudly for more. Smooth-faced young men, with crested *haoris*, hand-embroidered with their coat-of-arms, drank, too. Their narrow-slanting eyes were soon roving about the room, picking out the fairest of the women. The eyes sparkled brighter.

The dainty ladies, too, sipped at the pretty cups, laughed, giggled, and hissed, casting up shy little glances over the tops of their fans back at the young men or lowering heavy-lashed lids again as gouty husband beside them scowled.

With every lull in the talk and the laughter the monotonous strumming of *samisen* and *tsudsume* rose and fell in tinkling waves.

The brocaded canopy of crimson velvet was now the background for two figures. One was a young woman in a kimono of pale-blue embroidered with pink seashells and held together by a pink, watered silk sash. In her glossy black hair were many ornaments of gold, set with turquoises and pink coral. About her neck was a fine iron chain, from which dangled a single black pearl, the color of her house. For this — with her little upturned nose, black-lined eyes, thin painted lips, high cheek bones like her uncle — was the Princess Misono San, last of the Matsuyama.

Beside her stood a young man in crimson kimono, sash, and *haori* of the purest raw silk. On his finger

gleamed a single ring, set with a deep red, pigeon-blood ruby, the color of his house. For this, oval and olive-faced, frank-eyed and smiling, was the Prince Rennoske, last of the Ackagawa.

They were man and wife.

From the day of that final interview with the Baron Matsuyama, the prince's brain had been in a turmoil. Hemmed in on one side by all the bars of ancient custom, driven on the other by Yukitaka and his talk that the union would benefit both prince and kingdom, he had wearily consented to the match, silencing the old student's, "And we find Kiku San, there is a simple way out, for policy and love have never yet gone hand in hand."

There had been the usual weeks of preparation on the bride's part. Moreover, there was some respect due to her dead uncle, self-slain at the prince's command. For the times were grim times. Had the outcome of the rebellion been the other way, Rennoske felt sure he would not have been given even this honor.

The groom, or those who looked after his interests, had been busy in their own way. There were messengers to be sent abroad to all those who were rich or influential in the country, inviting them to the wedding feast. There were the decorations, the food, and the wine, and many other details to be looked after in so important an event.

At length the day arrived, and there was much bustling about the stone court before the lawn and the flower beds. Servant, *Samurai*, and *Saimyo* ran in and out of the dozen buildings, making ready the coming of the guests.

All afternoon these poured in through the stone dragons of the great gate, borne thither in their palanquins. They had been given quarters in the many *shojis* of the courtiers, where they ate and drank until the evening.

Rennoske remembered now that long ride in his litter, accompanied by fifty knights, to the palace of the Matsuyama in the woods. The princess was waiting for him in the great room, with its black lacquered floor and brazen gongs. He saw the stacked armor and the five-armed goddess in the green-lit alcove.

The white of the princess's robe seemed appropriate in such a place. To him it represented real and not mimic death. He remembered his words:

"I am come to take thee to the palace for the honorable ceremony of marriage, O Princess Misono San."

And her answer as she smiled, scarlet-lipped:

"And I am ready to be your bride, O Prince Rennoske."

She rode back in the litter with him. He said nothing, nor did she.

There was the procession through the crowd in the light of the lanterns, while they were pelted with flowers. There were the nine cups of sipped *sakkee*, she drinking first as his guest. There was the arrival of the Shinto priest, with his high, baglike hat of black velvet, and the handsome, richly clad boys who held up his long silken train, embroidered in gold and silver thread.

As for the ceremony itself, that seemed now pretty much a jumble of mumbled words and incantations. It was hard for him to realize that he was eternally bound to this woman whom he hated.

The ring of lantern-lit faces all about him seemed somehow to bear a leering expression. Then, the priests' mumblings over, the nine sipped cups of *sakkee* again, he drinking first as her lord and master.

They were man and wife.

The guests began to depart one by one, the old, gouty husbands by this time unable to see the sly glances of their wives, while the young men thickly whispered extravagant pleasantries that sounded doubly loud in dainty little ears.

All this by the carved and gilded pillars that held up the roof, where the coolies came in a seemingly never-ending line bearing the palanquins. Silk rustled, voices were loud, and *Saianara's* stuttered as unsteady hands groped among the silken cushions.

By the velvet canopy there was many a, "Thou-

sand years of happiness come to your supreme highnesses!" and often repeated, "May the union of the Ackagawa and the Matsuyama be fruitful and a blessing to the kingdom!" while bowing couple after bowing couple passed before the royal pair.

Rennoske bore up under this as bravely as he could. He had always taken things as they came, with a patient shrug and a light heart for the morrow. Small blame to him, though, when his heart was elsewhere, if he found this marriage a bitter draught to swallow.

At last the shouts of the litter bearers died away into the night, and they were alone with Yukitaka. The old man clapped his hands, and out of the darkness into the light, feet pattering over the stone, the Koreans brought the litter again.

Rennoske saw the student's thin arms raised over his head. He longed to halt the benediction that he knew was coming from those lips. A blessing on this union? Nay, Yukitaka, speak it not — it is sacrilege!

"May the light of heaven shine upon you both," came the old man's voice, slow and solemn. "May the house of the Red River and the house of the Mountain of Pines be ever at peace in the loving embrace of their two most worthy children.

"May the words of an old man rise like white mist to heaven, and the gods send it back again

like pearl-dropping rain to cover your house and make the flowers in the garden of your lives bloom everlasting."

"I thank thee, O counselor," said Misono.

But Rennoske, with graven face, walked slowly toward the litter. Entering it, he called out:

"The lanterns go out — the men wait. It is time to depart."

"I follow where calls your voice, O my husband," she answered.

Yukitaka, smiling broadly, helped her into the litter.

That ride in the night! Rennoske thought it a horror. The red August moon showed its rim over the distant mountains, silhouetting the fir trees black-barred against it. There it was again, the red and black. Were they not together, even in nature?

No, tomorrow the sun would shine; where would the red and black be then? He looked out at the other side. There, a lurid speck, shone the bonfire that blazed before the palace of the Baron Matsuyama — the funeral fire of the Princess Misono San, to show she was dead to her house. Gods — and the trees of the forest before it — black, black, black!

Rennoske closed his eyes to shut out the sight. A scene came clearly to his brain. A dim cave, an old man, a *Samurai* in armor that watched a squirming

monkey on the ground. And that scarlet-clad figure of a child that screamed. Was it not the woman that now sat beside him?"

"We are here, your highness," he heard her say, rousing him out of the dream of his childhood that puzzled him. He opened his eyes.

The litter had been halted before a *shoji* at the side of a pond, where the wide leaves of water lilies caught the yellow glow, for light shone through the paper walls and shimmered on the still water.

He got out of the palanquin and let her lead him up the gravel path that was flanked with moon-tinted hyacinths. The door opened with a clatter. Rennoske, unmindful of the beauty of the scene, followed his wife inside the *shoji.* The room was small, for there were other paper walls in their grooves. From behind them came muffled titterings and vague, fluttering shadows.

"Deign to sit here, O my husband," said Misono San archly, pointing to a lambskin rug spread out upon the matting. "I would change my dress of ceremony for one more fitting to ease and comfort."

Bowing low, she turned to a *shoji* wall, slid it back, and disappeared behind it. The titterings came again.

Rennoske flopped down like an automaton on the lambskin rug. His wedding night — the irony of it! He was not given much to midnight soliloquy

or rumination, but the present situation struck him as being grotesque, and he could not but think upon it. Here he was, ruler of the land, supposedly infallible, yet forced against his will to marry a woman he hated.

Was it not laughable that, after all the fighting and the bloodshed, he should capitulate this way to the Matsuyama? It seemed to him as though the black were triumphant, even though the baron and the Black Boar both lay moldering in their graves.

Sitting in silence, he tried his hardest to make the best of it. A marriage for policy's sake would have been nothing to trouble him if he had not loved some one else. As it was, he did, and knew that love was returned.

In war he had been victorious. In peace and the ways of peace it looked as if the Matsuyama were triumphant.

"You have seemed sad, my prince." It was Misono's voice beside him. She wore a crimson kimono, one of his gifts. "I should prove an ill wife indeed if I sought not to cheer you. It is for this I bid my maidens wait on me here. Shall they dance for you, O my prince?"

"Nay, princess," he answered wearily. "It is not for geisha dancing to soothe my troubled spirit."

"Geisha dancing!" she replied, raising her pen-

ciled eyebrows. "Nay, you cast a slur upon me. It is not for the Princess Misono of the Matsuyama and the Ackagawa to be attended by geisha! Maidens all are my waiting-women, chosen for their beauty and daintiness. Shall not your eyes feast upon them in the dance?"

"As thou wilt," he answered, stifling a yawn.

The princess clapped her hands.

"O Hana! O Haru!" she called. "We shall have the *Genroku* Odori for his supreme highness —*Isoge!*"

Behind the paper walls was now a bustling. Soon the rattling of them announced that they were being slid from their grooves. Rennoske glanced carelessly up.

Three girls in brilliant kimonos stood in the center of the room, under a string of lanterns. Two were in blue and one in yellow, while two in purple sat in the shadow of the alcove with *samisens*. He saw the bows of their sashes behind — the princess had spoken the truth, they were not geisha. *Hei* — what of it?

Soon the strumming of the instruments rang out mournfully. He saw the slow, graceful movements of the six arms. Were the postures pleasing? He knew not. Were the smiles bright? He cared not. In a sort of half-awakened state, like a man hearing a sound blown by an occasional wind across a

silent lake, he listened to the song as one of the girls droned it forth.

Ever before me,
His haunting eyes I see. Wo
Shall come upon me,
If I wander far or near.

Gods! Was this to cheer him, this whine of haunting eyes that haunted him day and night, since the clash of arms had ceased?

Stark lies he in death,
My lover's sword hath slain him.
In winter's cold snows;
In summer's glow; in springtime,
His eyes shall haunt me!

The song-story went on in the same dreary monotone, to tell of the beauteous one who sought happiness wandering with her swash-bucklering lover, yet never happy, pursued by the eyes of the man he had killed in a quarrel over her.

And now in this cave,
In silent meditation,
I seek to retrieve,
My life in sorrow shaken!

A shrill scream rang out!

Rennoske had a momentary flash of a purple shimmer in the lantern light. Then a deeper purple engulfed him and a body fell over his.

Arms held tightly about his neck. There was a thud on his shoulder, a screaming and pattering

of hurried feet. The thing about his neck groaned and then lay limp.

Quickly snatching away the clinging arms, he sprang to his feet and turned from the fleeing damsels. The Princess Misono San stood before him. Her eyebrows were raised, eyes gleaming, nostrils quivering. The expression of her face was diabolical. He saw why her arms were upraised behind her head. There, the hilt in her dainty hands, hung the heavy blade of a sword!

It was but the work of a second to grip her firmly by the wrists and bend her arms behind her. His face was close to hers.

"It is with a dance of death thou wouldst entertain me, O princess," he whispered. "Strange must be the hatred that kills upon the bridal night."

"Let me go! Let me go!" she screamed. "Thy flesh creeps. Thou hast a demon. Let me go, I say!"

Still he held her fast, while her screams rang out in the night. Somewhere in the back of his brain that scream called up an answering echo.

The scene was the dark cave again, an old man watched, an armor-clad soldier, a monkey, and the talk of death. Misono San's was the scream of hatred and disappointment as now.

"Who hath told thee to do this, or is it thine own invention?" he asked.

Her breath coming in choking, hysterical gasps, she answered:

"You will let me go, if I tell?"

"Aye."

"Then I swore to mine uncle the baron on the day he died, to slay you. I wiped the sword of our house clean of his blood and vowed upon it that it should next be stained by yours. But you have a demon who guards you. Thrice have they slain you, only to find you living again. Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!"

But if anyone possessed a demon it was the Princess Misono San, for now she had lost all control of herself. She lashed and twisted like a slim palm in a typhoon, while her screams rent the air.

Rennoske released his hold. With a terrible swiftness she ran to the door, swung at it with her sword, cleaving a great V in the paper, through which she leaped head first.

Again she screamed outside, then once again; but the second was fainter than the first. A third and a fourth time the piercing cry rang out — yet the last was far away.

Rennoske listened — he heard it once more. Was that a splash in the water that followed it?

There had been another attempt upon his life, even while he was the *Daimyo*. Would the assassins never rest? Yet through all the strife and turmoil

of it a voice of hope sounded like the throbbing of a single string.

Misono San was gone. Dead or deserting him, Misono San was gone forever out of his life. The last bond between him and the Matsuyama had snapped!

An attempt had been made upon his life Rennoske knew; but who was it that had saved him? The dancers had fled, yet he felt sure one of them had done the helping deed, one of the two in the alcove, for he distinctly saw the purple kimono come toward him. A low moan at his feet caused him to look down.

In the dim light, for four of the six lanterns had been blown out by the inrushing wind from the gash in the door, he saw a huddled purple figure on the floor.

How came she to save him? he thought, as he stooped down to her, for she lay upon her face. From the alcove she had probably seen the upraised arm of the princess, and out of pity, sudden affection, patriotism — who could fathom a woman's sudden impulse?

He touched her shoulder and gently turned her over. Light — light — he must have light! Gods! What was this warm and wet upon his hand — blood? Could she live? She must! Where was the light?

Reaching high his hand, he snatched one of the lanterns from its string. With trembling fingers he held it close to the girl's face. The yellow glow behind the paper flickered through the bamboo-fiber ribs, flickered through the yellow paper — on the pale, upturned face of Kiku San.

Chapter XXIX

A Tear Upon a Painted Saucer

WHEN would this end? Such a to-do about a dozen pigs! Yet Rennoske listened patiently to the bare-legged man before him, who rambled on in a cracked voice:

"Even my blind mother could tell, O supreme highness, the spotted one was mine. The old sow hath borne me seven litters, each time twelve pigs. Now come twelve again, and in three days but eleven. Search I high and low, your supreme highness, even in the *godown* that hath not been opened since chrysanthemum time.

"Then on the Doll's Festival pass I the sty of Tamakichi. Squealing in a corner do I see my spotted pig, and Tamakichi's sow hath thirteen! Surely no sow hath thirteen pigs. It is but rare for one to have twelve. Hath your supreme highness ever heard of a sow with thirteen pigs? It is not good."

"Where is thy sow?" asked Rennoske.

"Outside the great stone gate, your supreme

highness," the man answered deferentially. "They would not let her in, though this morning scrubbed I her clean with hot water."

"And Tamakichi's sow?"

"Outside also, with her twelve and my spotted one."

Rennoske smiled.

"Place thy sow and the sow of Tamakichi's side by side," he said with assumed gravity. "One of my men will then take this wondrous spotted pig and twist its tail till it squeal. The sows will grunt and call it. *Hei!* My man looses the wondrous spotted pig and it will fly straight to its real mother. Thus do I decree. See that it is done, O Raku."

The man stood dazed in open-eyed awe. Then bowing to the floor he mumbled:

"Your supreme highness has the wisdom of all the gods rolled into one. May you reign a thousand years!"

Raku, the knight, led him out, still dazed and marveling.

"And now let us close the business of the day," said Rennoske, rising quickly.

"Might I crave a moment, your supreme highness," came Yukitaka's voice. "There are the six who await to thank you for their deliverance."

"What six?" Rennoske snapped, evidently annoyed.

"Iwashi and the crew of the Maya Maru."

"Admit them then," answered the prince, sitting again petulantly.

The sailors were brought in. Loud were their thanks for their release. They blessed the bamboo poles that had whacked their heads, for were it not for them, they might never have seen the heaven-sent ruler who freed them from slavery in an accursed land.

Rennoske thanked them each and bade them not praise him, but the dead man who had been their captain. He gave orders that each should be given money and a letter of high merit, which he would sign, and so dismissed them with his praises high on their lips.

Once again Yukitaka balked Rennoske's plans for closing the audience. There was a dispute over a milldam that took an hour, another controversy over a stolen ox. He settled them as quickly as he could, yet the sun was sinking over the red-tiled roof, making long the shadows of the hollyhocks, when all the business was through.

"At last," he cried, stretching himself, alone with Yukitaka. "Now for the best hour of the day. Does my litter wait by the fountain, Owl Eyes?" he asked, tapping the old student familiarly on the shoulder. "Indeed, a long stay have they had."

"A longer while must they tarry ere they return," answered the old man slyly.

"Nay, not so long," guiltily replied the prince. "But an hour or so."

"H-m," Yukitaka grunted. "Time flies fast at the *shoji* by the Pond of the Lilies. Too fast, methinks, for the good of the state."

"What meanest thou?" Rennoske snapped, bristling.

Yukitaka paused, then let fly the shaft.

"I mean the Prince Rennoske of the Ackagawa deigns to stoop too often. To comfort the sick is well, yet there are nurses and old women in plenty to stay hours by the side of a wounded handmaiden. It is not the business of the *Daimyo*."

"Durst thou so far presume?" thundered Rennoske. "Before thou wert known to high places, a dweller among musty books, she was beside me in my trouble. Her tender hand made smooth the places that were rough. Much did I suffer for her sake, much has she borne for mine. Thou goest too far, Yukitaka!"

The old student ran his long-nailed finger over the top of his fan, then he spoke with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yet but a handmaiden she is, and you — may you reign a thousand years — you are the *Daimyo!*"

Rennoske stood staring at him, lip between

thumb and forefinger, uncertain as to how he should take the speech. Then he laughed and answered boyishly, "The wise man is sometimes the fool, Yukitaka." Then going to the carved pillars, he cried out, "*Hei!* Speed there — bring the litter, *Isoge!*"

Light-hearted, he leaped in, leaving Yukitaka to stand in the shadow of the red-tiled roof, unnoticed.

Not long did Rennoske stay in the *shoji* by the Pond of the Lilies. Neither did Yukitaka stay long unnoticed in the shadow of the red-tiled roof. For the wily old counselor managed to find a dispute among the old and the new *Samurai* and sent knight post-haste to the prince to settle it. Rennoske came and smoothed over an exaggerated difficulty. He went back to the palace at nightfall, to stand himself unnoticed under the red-tiled roof.

As for Yukitaka, he turned the tables by going quickly to the *shoji* by the Pond of the Lilies. There he found a pale-faced girl lying upon a padded bedding, attended by an old servant of the court.

Long and earnestly the student of the mountains talked, while the girl listened. She sobbed a little, too; but the old man's voice was so soft and low, his reasoning so profound, that she promised to do as he asked, though, as she said, it would "tear out her soul." He left with soothing words, a complacent, satisfied Yukitaka. She remained in the

shoji by the Pond of the Lilies, a gently weeping Kiku San.

On the following afternoon Rennoske closed the audience early. The restraining voice of old Yukitaka was no longer a hindrance, for the old scholar had gone early that morning, leaving word that he had departed on "grave business of state." Prince Rennoske worried not a particle. If it was "business of state" Yukitaka was perfectly capable of handling it. If it were "grave," then he was doubly so, for such a word was not then present in the young man's vocabulary.

At about two o'clock he wandered out into the garden, and from the many brilliant flower beds gathered a bouquet. He took some time to arrange it by the cool, splashing fountain, for the art of bouquet making was an important one. By this means were conveyed many tender messages and many a love note between swain and maiden.

At last, having put it together with sufficient "philosophy," he cried out to his litter bearers, who waited his word. They bore him away, spurred on by an impulsive *Isoge!* that sent their bare feet pattering over grass, stone, and gravel. It was not hard to guess the destination of Prince Rennoske of the house of the Red River.

He found Kiku sitting up, her back to a pillar, evidently stronger, yet paler than usual. On her

lap was a porcelain saucer, a palette and paints beside her on the matting, while a slender brush was balanced between her thumb and forefinger.

"See, your supreme highness," she called as he came up the path, "my fingers have been busy again, for the pain has gone from my arm."

She held up the saucer to him, showing the daubs of red and green upon the white.

"Is it for me?" he asked, bending over her.

"Nay," she answered. "The clumsy work of a stupid girl is not a fitting gift for him who is the *Daimyo*."

She bowed her head as far as her bandaged shoulder would let her.

"*Hei*, Gentlest Flower," he cried. "To the sea with talk of *Daimyo*, *Saimyo*, and *Samurai!* I was Little Warrior to thee once, let me be Little Warrior still. Are my flowers well chosen?" he asked, handing her the bouquet.

"There is thought, remembrance, friendship, and gratitude," she answered, holding the flowers at arm's length. "And this sweet blossom. Nay, your supreme highness — I am not worthy of that."

"And why not, Gentlest Flower?" he said, sitting beside her. "It is not a new thought, this one of love. Did I not tell it thee in the rice fields of thy father? Has it not been ever in my heart since there I saw thee last, the rice plants in thy hands,

the gentle sunlight on thy hair? Nay, Kiku San, the thought is far from new."

"Yet were you but my foster-brother then," she replied with downcast eyes. "The *Daimyo* you were not."

"Aye, and I was, Kiku San," he answered, "though thou and I knew it not. The love that came to the farmer's son is in the same heart as in the heart of the man that is now the *Daimyo*. The *Daimyo* loves as the farmer's son loved. In such things all men are equal, for the little that is godlike in us is shared equally by all men, prince or peasant."

Kiku San answered nothing. A struggle was going on within her, for her bosom heaved, her eyes were tear-sparkled.

"Thou dost love me, Kiku San," Rennoske went on. "Have I not seen the signs? Does not the cherry blossom and the nightingale's song tell us that spring is here? Have I not read the word in thine eyes, have I not seen it trembling on thy lips? Thou dost love me, Kiku San."

"Aye," she wailed, rocking gently to and fro, "more than tongue can tell, more than is given to the gods themselves. There can be no harm in telling that."

"Be my princess then," he whispered, leaning close to her. "Be my wife."

"Your princess! Your wife!" she sobbed. "Nay, nay, nay! Are you blinded, Prince Rennoske, that you cannot see the pitfall that lies before you? Your princess — your wife? Nay, nay, it cannot be!"

"And why not, Gentlest Flower?" he answered. "What is there to prevent?"

"A towering mountain, an endless sea, a whirling, spanless torrent," she answered, her words coming fast. "What am I but a peasant girl? Do the people wish for such to rule over them? Will the haughty *Samurai* bow low to me? To prevent — there is naught to sanction but our love, and that prevails not among the high-born, it seems. Do you see now?"

"It shall prevail," he answered imperiously. "Thou speakest in another's words. Thrice hast thou been taken from me — it shall not be so again. I command it!"

The light of hope illumined her face as he spoke. He commanded her — he was the *Daimyo* — she must obey. But the hope was soon drowned by another thought.

"It is too late, your supreme highness," she moaned.

"Too late! What meanest thou?"

Her words came with a terrible effort.

"Yukitaka — he is even now in the Land of the

Purple Lotus, where he sues the *Daimyo* there for the hand of his daughter in marriage to thee. I promised him I would not tell, but even in that have I bungled!"

"Bungled?" he cried, springing to his feet. "Gods of my ancestors, it is he who hath bungled! Wives, wives, wives! Am I to have them thrust down my throat like fish into a cormorant! Am I, the *Daimyo*, to be made the shuttlecock of fate by a doddering old fool?

"First it is the Princess Misono San — she tries to slay me. Then when I find again the love of my life, she is snatched away from me by this dreamer of fine ways and soft manners. But it shall not be — by Inari I swear it!"

Rennoske of the house of the Red River ran madly down the gravel path, flanked by the hyacinths, leaving Kiku San to drop a tear into the saucer she had painted in the *shoji* by the Pond of the Lilies.

Chapter XXX

What Said the Tapper of Laquer Trees

IT was even as Kiku San had said.

Yukitaka had been gone a week now to the Purple Lotus country to sue the *Daimyo* Kotara for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Rennoske wasted no time in sending his swiftest runners in pursuit of the old student, with orders to bring him back at any cost.

The situation was more serious than it appeared to be at first glance. Supposing Yukitaka reached the *Daimyo* of Katsu and Nokodate and obtained his consent? Could Rennoske turn and say he did not want his daughter?

The *Daimyo* of the Purple Lotus had helped him regain his throne. Feudal lords of old Japan brooked no such affronts. War would inevitably follow, and Rennoske, with untried men at his back and no spirit in the fight, felt as though he would fare badly.

He sat at his usual place on the tiger-skin, under

the canopy of brocaded velvet, trying to evolve some way out of the difficulty. A million curses on the head of old Yukitaka for his well-meaning yet tangling interference! Try as he might, there was no way clear to him — he was hopelessly enmeshed in the student's hope-destroying plans for his welfare.

He rose and paced the floor, lip between thumb and forefinger. Laughter came from the garden, where the silk-clad courtiers listened to a troupe of traveling story-tellers.

There was no laughter for Rennoske that day, nor had there been in this week of soul-rending suspense that had passed since his last talk with Kiku. He had purposely avoided the girl, for he feared that the sight of her would only make keener the mind torture he was undergoing.

No, there seemed no way out of it, unless old Yukitaka was overtaken. His life's happiness depended then on the fleetness of his messengers. Gods! how he longed to climb to the highest mountain peak and with a voice of thunder cry down to them: "*Isoge! Isoge!*"

The laughter outside had died down and a deep murmur of the men's voices came instead.

"We had best tell his supreme highness," he heard one say. "This is indeed weighty news."

He longed to dispense with these grave bows as

the two nobles entered to find him standing by the lavender alcove.

"There comes a merchant with news of deep note," said the first. "We thought we might dare to interrupt your serene meditations and tell your supreme highness."

"Admit the man, then," snapped Rennoske impatiently.

More profound bows as the begoggled, mud-spattered man came in. Gods! would he not speak and have done with this bobbing?

"What wouldst thou say to the prince?" said Rennoske, controlling himself. "Grave news should not pause upon the brink — but over with the fall. Rise and speak, good sir."

"I am Ginnaku, a merchant of silver," the man faltered. "I took the road from Boruku to Yama Ino because I feared to trust my apprentice, who hath seemed rather wild of late. But gods of my ancestors, methought I would ne'er reach my destination, for all the way from Takenaka to the Obigawa's banks the road swarmed with angry peasants!

"They seemed distraught and asked me strange questions about your supreme highness's marriage. There is naught so odd in that, except that they said they came here to the palace to right some wrong they had suffered at your hands.

"All the night have I stumbled along the river-

bank to outdistance them, but they were ever along the way, sleeping. I knew not if your supreme highness knew of their presence, and so thought to tell you. I hope I have not angered you by being the bearer of stale news."

"Indeed, no," answered Rennoske, interested yet disappointed. "How many were they, O Ginnaku, thinkest thou?"

"There might be any number from two to three hundred, O highness. It was hard to tell in the darkness, and I do not see so well."

"It is enough, O Ginnaku," Rennoske replied. Then turning to the other two: "See that this man is rested, fed, and sent upon his way with a safe guard. Then leave me to myself."

Here was a new thorn in his side! Another uprising, and why? To right a wrong at his hands? In what way had he wronged them? Could they mean Misono San? Was she alive and stirring them against him? There was talk of his marriage — that must be it. Was the baron's prophecy of continued strife true, then?

There was a council in the room of the red velvet canopy that afternoon. The *Samurai* were for arming and going out to crush what was evidently a rebellion. They, some bearing the scars of peasant weapons, were in favor of nipping such a thing in the bud.

But Rennoske, who had been peasant-raised to his throne and knew the men with whom he had to deal, ventured a different opinion.

"I know no cause for discontent," he said to the ring of nobles about him. "These men come to have me right a wrong, whatever that wrong may be. Shall we again drench our fair land in blood by meeting them with the sharp edge of our sword? Nay, *Saimyo*, let us first argue the matter."

"Argue with peasants?" cried one, more bitter than the rest. "It is hardly meet, O prince. Speech and the ways of speech become them not."

"Yet I am from them and should know," answered Rennoske.

"Shall we wait here till they come upon us, then?" asked one who learned to honor and respect the word of his prince.

"Nay," Rennoske answered. "I shall go out to meet them, for they are my children."

A sullen roar of protest was his answer. He would have insisted, but there was some policy in listening.

"Then let any number of you up to ten go out and meet them. Tell them to choose from their number one who is best able to plead their cause. Tell them that the Prince Rennoske meets him alone and unarmed where he last spoke to them a peasant. If the men are of my people, they will understand. This will I do, this do I say, your *Daimyo*."

Five of the *Samurai* agreed to go, three of them being formerly of the victorious peasant army. It was late afternoon when they left. Rennoske spent room-pacing hours in their absence filled with many vague misgivings as to the cause of this uprising.

Why, too, did not his messengers return? Had Yukitaka been successful after all? There was labor and thankless toil in being the son of a farmer, lurking death and ever-present danger in the life of a generalissimo of rebellious peasants, yet it was far from peace and serenity to be a *Daimyo*, even though surrounded by clanking knights and silken hangings. It was not all ease to sit upon a tiger-skin rug before a crimson velvet canopy brocaded with threads of silver and gold.

Midnight saw the return of the five knights. One of them bore the message:

"Where the helmet of the man they called 'Little Warrior' fell asunder and the Prince Rennoske knew himself. In the first full light of the sun, there will a man he knows, alone and unarmed, meet the *Daimyo*."

Rennoske slept but little that night. Somehow he felt that the sun of this coming day would shine upon his fate. The thought of what that fate might be racked his brain more than the hated malady of the past had ever done.

With the first stroke of dawn he rose and bathed

in the garden, donned clean linen and the kimono of crimson with the crimson sash. Alone and unarmed he trod the gravel path past the palace, while the dim light shone upon the opening flowers and full-blooming morning glories.

He passed the grove of camphor trees, whose leaves were just taking on the first light of the sunrise. Below, the slope rolled away; where the ground looked like motionless waves of the sea, the winding river gleamed among the waving green grass. The pennons of the anchored barge by the stone quay fluttered in a faint breeze.

As Rennoske took the path down the hill, he saw another figure toiling up. It was too far to distinguish, yet the man was plainly old, for his back bent low as he picked his steps.

The man turned to his left from the path and stood waiting. Rennoske quickened his pace and came on down. Within thirty feet of where the man stood, the prince knew that this was indeed where his helmet had fallen, cleft by the Black Boar's sword.

The man, catching sight of Rennoske, fell face downward upon the ground and lay thus until the prince's voice bade him rise. He rose slowly and painfully. In the first full light of the sun Rennoske looked upon the face of the Tapper of Laquer Trees!

"Thou!" Rennoske cried. "What grievance hast

thou against me, reverend sir, that thou shouldst bring the farmer from his fields and the woodman from his ax?"

"No grievance at all, your supreme highness," the man answered. "I am but the mouthpiece of many, and it is but a boon we crave."

"Anything that I can grant I will," Rennoske replied. "But for the reason that thou it is who art the mouthpiece, for well and faithful hast thou served me, and I have taken from thee much. How knewest thou this spot?"

The man answered, smiling:

"Does not every true heart that fought with you know it? Are there not many who are happy to show it to one who craved long to see?"

Rennoske was deeply touched at the man's devotion. It was some moments before he could speak again.

"And what is the boon my children crave?"

"You must first forgive us for daring to meddle in the business of your supreme highness," the man began boldly. "But it hath come to us through an accident that you were to be joined in marriage to the daughter of the *Daimyo* Kotara. He who plans thus, thinks in his mind, no doubt, that yonder *Daimyo* is old and will soon die, and therefore you will be the inheritor of his kingdom, he having as yet no son. Thus will you be a great *shogun* of this

and his two kingdoms. The plan is wise and well laid, yet are there drawbacks.

"Perhaps you die—which the gods forbid. Perhaps the *Daimyo* of the Purple Lotus is crafty and, having you in his power through his daughter, will encroach upon our lands. Through either way, would it be he and not you who would be the mighty *shogun?*"

"There is much reason in what you say," Rennoske answered, seeing words of hope in the man's message.

"Birth hath given you a throne," the Tapper of Laquer Trees went on, his voice vibrating with feeling, "yet who was it that placed you there? Not the silk-clad *Saimyo* or the clanking *Samurai.* We, with our sweat and blood, have done it.

"We thought you but one of us whom Heaven hath inspired — it was our desire that you rule us. It transpires that one of us you are not; but the heaven-born *Daimyo,* whom the gods have ever protected.

"Glad we are that this is so. Glad we are for every blessed moment you have spent with us. Where is the man among us who does not boldly show the wounds he got while in your service? It is but just due to him who took the yoke from our necks."

Rennoske held up his hand.

"It is enough, reverend sir. Ask thy boon and I will grant it, nor haggle over it, for thou hast served me more than any man but one."

"It is our wish, then," the man went on, "that you rule us many years. We crave, too, that you marry not the daughter of the Purple Lotus house, but choose a princess from among the people as a token of good faith."

"A princess from among the people!" Rennoske fairly screamed the words with joy. "Of all things, thou shouldst ask this, *hei!*"

He made a flying leap at the Tapper of Laquer Trees, caught him by his broad shoulders, and shook him out of pure excess of glee.

The man cowered and whimpered:

"I take back the words. Slay me for saying them. I have offended. Give me but time to bid my men tell the counselor to go upon his way, for you are displeased."

"What counselor?"

"The man, Yukitaka."

"Where is he?"

"We hold him prisoner, for his litter bearers babbled the news and said it was of his own doing that he went to fetch you a bride!"

Daimyos are supposed to be dignified, sedate personages, seated under brocaded canopies or walking in beautiful gardens, surrounded by clanking knights,

silken courtiers, and fair ladies. The Tapper of Laquer Trees had heard this many a time.

What was his astonishment on seeing the *Daimyo* before him, and a *Daimyo* he knew he was, pick up the skirts of his crimson kimono, kick up his legs, slap his thighs, kick again, laughing and chuckling, bobbing up and down like a silly boy at sight of his first kite.

"*Hei!*" this *Daimyo* shouted between roars and chuckles, "he is a prisoner — held up by peasants, this dreamer of fine ways and manners! Have him ducked in the river, reverend sir, make his face black with ink, tie a fish to his pigtail, and chase him into the sea! Stopped by my peasants — *hei* — *hei!* The great Yukitaka — the Wise Owl — *hei!* Stop my mouth, reverend sir, or I shall die of laughing!"

The Tapper of Laquer Trees turned down the hill. All three of these ridiculous orders might have been carried out on the old student of the mountains if Rennoske had not stopped his merriment.

"Nay, reverend sir, I did but jest. Have the counselor return to me and I will deal with him — the old, stalking heron, the squawking cormorant!" He changed the tone of his levity to a command: "Tell my children that the Prince Rennoske, of the house of the Red River, their *Daimyo*, marries a sister to them with the waning of the moon."

"Then we must choose —"

"Nay, I have already chosen. She is the fairest chrysanthemum in the garden, the only daughter of the Farmer of the Three Wells," Rennoske answered, happiness beaming on his face.

Rennoske skirted the trees and almost at a run came upon the *shoji* by the Pond of the Lilies. The door slid back gently at his tap and the old nurse's face appeared in the opening.

"She rests, your supreme highness," the woman said softly. "It is a good, healthful sleep, and she must needs come out of it rested in both mind and body. She talked some in her sleep — something she hath learned by heart. She is worn and weary, poor chick!"

"Yet I would see her," Rennoske insisted. "I will not wake her, only sit and watch. I have that to tell her that will make her strong and well again when her wound heals."

The woman slid back the door and left him. He looked to the right of it and there, in the yellow light of the sun that shone opalescent through the paper, lay Kiku San.

Her pretty little head was pillowed on the sleeve of the purple kimono. Her raven hair shone silky. The woman was right, it was the deep sleep of returning health. Slowly he bent over her and whispered close to her eyelids: "Gentlest Flower!"

Her lips moved and formed words, though she still slept. He bent closer and listened.

"When the sun shines golden on the rice fields, when the moon of autumn turns the spray of the mountain torrent into a thousand tiny rubies — when the heron flies across the sea and the air is sweet with the salt and the seaweed — when the soft spring rain scatters the petals of the cherry blossoms — when the chrysanthemums nod, red, yellow, and purple in the November breeze — then will I think of thee, O Kiku San."

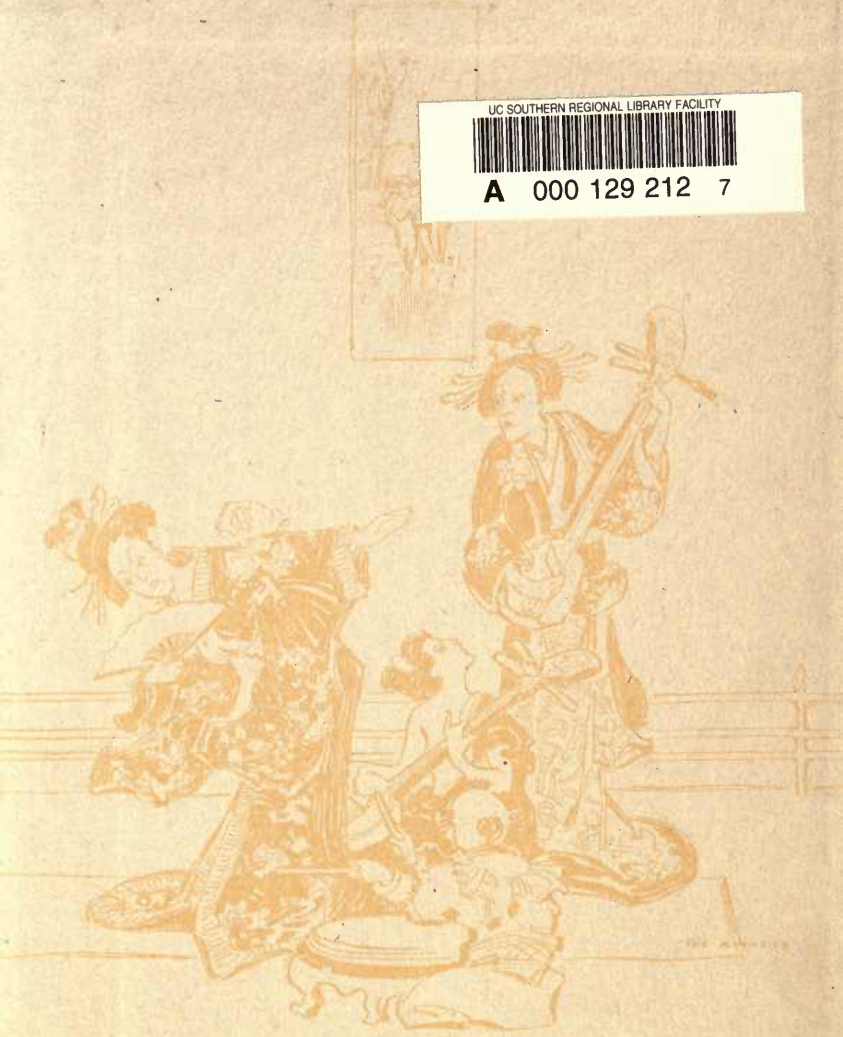
He knew they were his own words, spoken the day he had seen her before he left his foster-father's house.

The door slid back and a shadow darkened the matting. Rennoske looked up. It was Yukitaka.

"It seems I have displeased you," whined the old student, the expression on his face like a guilty puppy. "I am here to offer my much-offending head."

"Hush!" the Prince Rennoske whispered, holding up his hand to silence him. "Who talks of tumbling heads? Wilt wake the princess?"

"The princess? Why, what means —"

"Silence — thou bungler ever! Dost thou not see Kiku San sleeps?"

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